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TEXAS RANGERS

VOLUME 38, NUMBER 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION MARCH, 1950

COMPLETE NOVEL

The Wire War

By Jackson Cole

When the Scarlet Riders of the Big Bend murder a young Ranger recruit, Jim Hatfield enters a land of strife with his six-guns bared for action as he joins in the grim struggle over "bobbed" wire! 11

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HIYA, gals and galluses! Along Oregon's famous Rogue River, a few miles below the bustling town of Grants Pass, are miles of hopyards. Pickers were busy, harvesting the fluffy "beer berries" from the tall vines, when I moseyed into a big hopyard on a mellow autumn afternoon and asked for the boss.

He turned out to be a husky rancher in a hay hat and dusty overalls, driving a tractor that was hauling a heaped wagonload to the dryer.

I wasn't much interested in hops, but figured it was polite to confab for a minute or two before I mentioned my real errand. The hop grower, he was a sociable sort. He shut off the tractor noise, dangled a tired leg from the seat and thumbed a load of tobacco into his pipe.

Hops and Mice

"Along rich bottomlands like this, from California on up into Washington," he began between puffs, "about one thousand blamed fools like me are harvesting a twenty-million dollar crop this month."

"Sounds like hops pay big," I said.

He shrugged.

"Sure. Sounds like it. But some of us are bound to go broke."

"Broke? How come?"

"Well, for one thing, we're growing more hops than the breweries can use. And growing costs are up, way up."

"The old story, a crop surplus, is that the trouble? Isn't there any other use for hops, except in making beer?"

He looked thoughtful. His answer surprised me.

"There will be, maybe. It all depends on the mice."

"Mice?" I exclaimed. "What mice?"

He smiled a little.

"The mice they're using for experiments in laboratories. If those mice pull through, you'll soon be hearing about the most sensational medical discoveries since penicillin."

By now, he really had me interested. Hops and mice—what did they have to do with some new-fangled remedy? He saw my puzzled look. He slid off the tractor and picked a ripening hop, that looked something like a cockleburr. He broke it open.

Lupulon and Humulon

"See this yellow substance that looks like pollen? It's called lupulin. It contains two acids, lupulon and humulon. Scientists have found out that these acids destroy certain disease-producing bacteria. So they infected a heap of mice with tuberculosis. They treated half of them with hop acids. Experiments already show that the treated mice are lots better off than the others. So now the laboratories aim to try the treatment on larger animals, then humans. If it's a success—well sir, you can figure out for yourself what a blessing that'd be for ailing mankind."

"Great guns, yes! It'd save thousands of lives!"

"That's right. Even if hops are only a partial success in ridding the suffering world of white plague, hop-growers won't have to worry about a market any more."

"And your hopyard, here, would suddenly be worth a fortune!"

"Sure. There's only so much land that'll grow 'em. Has to be just the right combination of soil and climate. But I'm not counting on being a millionaire, not yet. Not for sure. You see, our U. S. Hop Growers' Association pinned its hopes on another big thing once before that didn't come off."

"What was that?"

Hop Pop

"They figured on making a soft drink called hop pop. It was good and wholesome. But it had too much of a medicine flavor to suit

(Continued on page 8)

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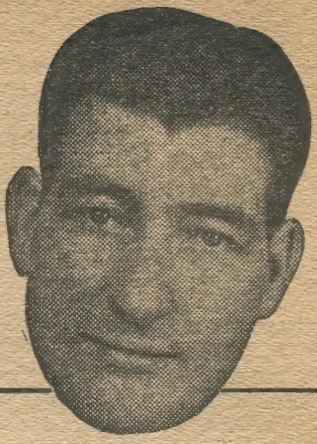

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THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 6)

the public. Some folks don't go for that bittery beer taste. In the meantime, ammonium sulfate fertilizer, and we use tons of it, costs twice what it used to. Burlap sacking, used to wrap the 200-pound bales of dried hops, cost a dime for years. Now we pay 35 cents for it. And so on. By the way, what did you want to see me about?"

I'd plumb forgotten!

"Seems mighty insignificant, after what you've told me," I said sheepishly, "but down yonder on the river, on the other side of your hopyard, is one of the best—"

"One of the best fishing places along the Rogue. And you want permission to cross my property to get there," he finished for me.

"Yep. That's right."

"Go to it. There's a fine riffle down about a half-mile, and the steelhead are running. Good luck."

He climbed back on the tractor and gunned it and I yelled my thanks as he dusted away towards the dryer with his load of hops.

I found the riffle and had a pretty good afternoon, spending some twenty minutes of it landing a six-pounder on a Golden Demon fly and losing another.

A Chinook Salmon

I also tied onto a Chinook salmon around 25 pounds. A fish big and powerful enough to leap waterfalls and scoot up roaring rapids isn't bothered much by the puny pull of a 4½-ounce trout rod. It takes a long time to land one. And salmon have more time on their hands than the fisherman, as a rule.

Besides, salmon were out of season on that stretch of river, it being spawning time. I saw dozens of big ones, fanning out their nests in the gravel, depositing and fertilizing them, then covering them four or five inches deep with their worn, frayed tails. Once in the while, as I waded along the riffle, a busy spawner would bump into my legs. Sometimes they knock a fisherman's props from under him.

Another thing to look out for are the redds, or nests. You can wade a smooth gravel shallow, then come back a day or so later and find that the salmon have gouged out deep holes, so deep that your hat floats off if you fall into one.

(Continued on page 91)

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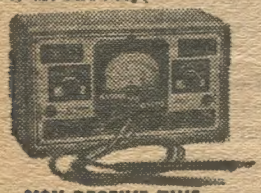

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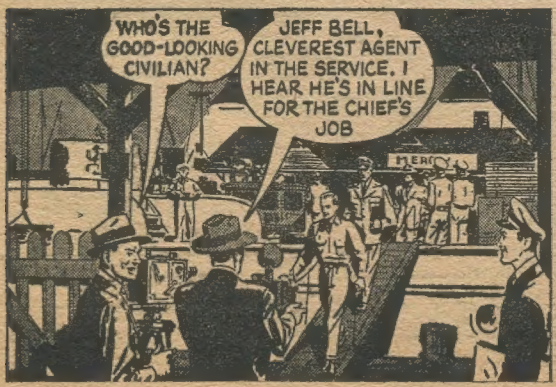
TIED UP TO A LONELY DOCK IN A SMALL SOUTHERN BAY, JEFF BELL, "TROPICAL TRAMP" IS SPENDING A QUIET EVENING ABOARD HIS BATTERED LAUNCH, WHEN...

LATER
TRAP WORKED. COUNTERFEITERS LED ME TO CACHE. BOTH CAPTURED, ALONG WITH PLATES. BELL
I'LL BE GLAD TO SHED THIS BEACHCOMBER RIG. CAN I CLEAN UP HERE?

WONDERFUL BLADE YOU'VE GOT HERE! I CAN'T RECALL A SMOOTHER, EASIER SHAVE!
THIN GILLETTES GO OVER BIG ON THIS SHIP. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN



FOR QUICK, CLEAN, GOOD-LOOKING SHAVES... AND MORE OF 'EM PER BLADE ...USE THIN GILLETTES. THESE BLADES ARE BY FAR THE KEENEST AND LONGEST-LASTING IN ALL THE LOW-PRICED FIELD. PRECISION MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR EXACTLY, THIN GILLETTES PROTECT YOUR FACE AGAINST NICKS AND IRRITATION. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE ECONOMICAL 10-BLADE PACKAGE
THIN Gillette 10 BLADES
10-25¢
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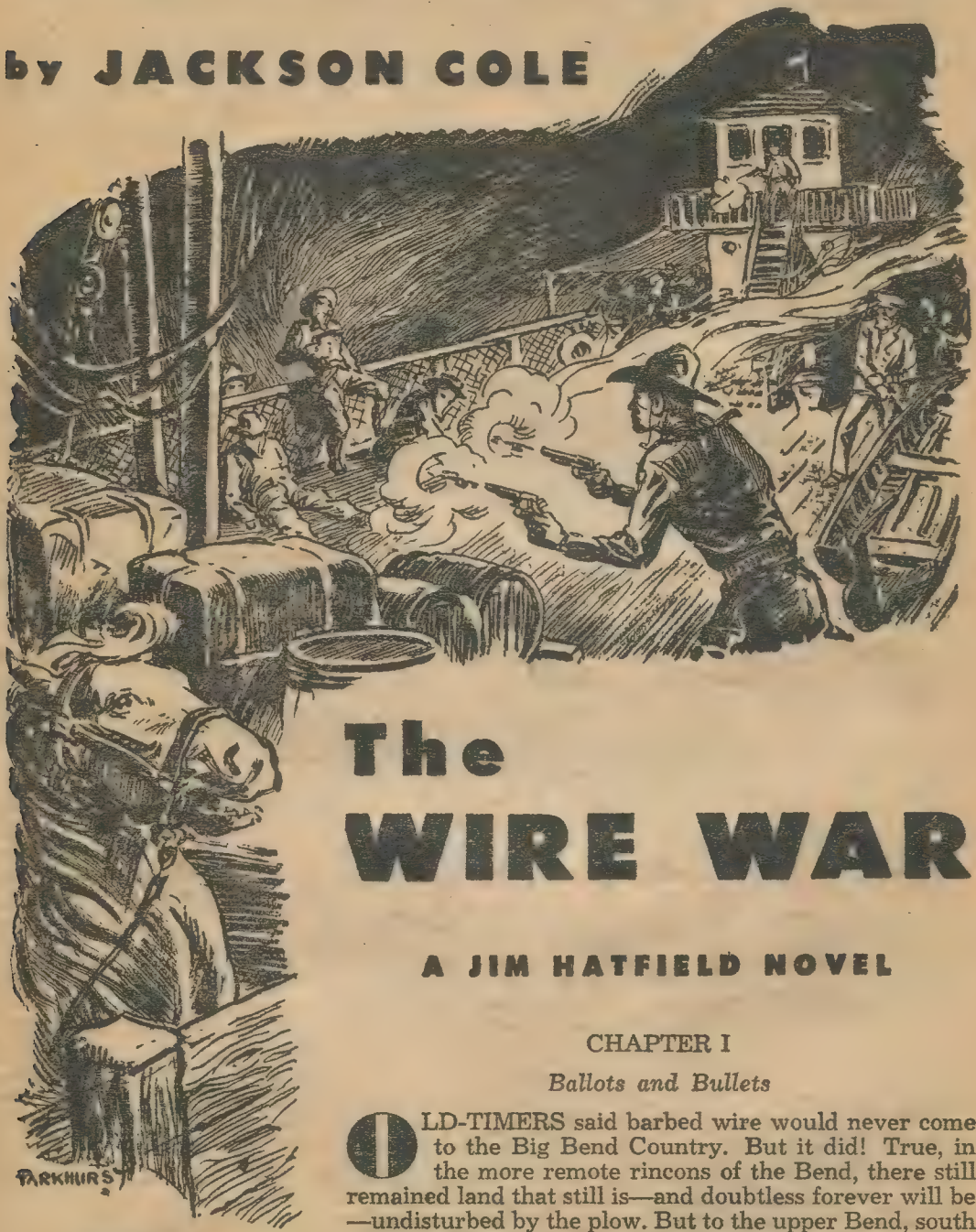
NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

When the Scarlet Riders of the Big Bend kill a young Ranger recruit, Hatfield enters a land of strife with his six-guns bared for action!

by JACKSON COLE



Hatfield's sixes boomed again, and another man went down (CHAP. IV)

The WIRE WAR

A JIM HATFIELD NOVEL

CHAPTER I

Ballots and Bullets

OLD-TIMERS said barbed wire would never come to the Big Bend Country. But it did! True, in the more remote rincons of the Bend, there still remained land that still is—and doubtless forever will be—undisturbed by the plow. But to the upper Bend, south of the railroad line that is the string to the bow, "bobbed" wire had come, miles and miles of it.

Behind the bristling barricade were broad acres where

A Texas Avenger Plays a Fighting Role in a

grew wheat, alfalfa and other crops. The cultivated lands lay like a lamb encircled by the paws of a lion, a lion that was the rangeland extending to the far-off line of the horizon and beyond.

But the lamb was a militant lamb. Unlike the conventional run of lambs, it showed double rows of bared teeth and dared the lion to do his damnedest.

To Gordon Wagner, those rust-red barbed strands were as livid weals seared across his flesh. Wagner was a grizzled cattle baron who, folks said, got his start running "wet" cows across the Rio Grande from Mexico. He owned the great Running W ranch with its commodious, luxuriously furnished casa, its deep, cool canyons and steadily flowing springs and its many thousand head of cows.

Self-assured to the verge of arrogance, Wagner was a power in the land. His lesser neighbors deferred to him as a veritable overlord, listened to his advice, obeyed his orders as a matter of course. The great county he ruled politically was larger than an Eastern state. His word elected judges, commissioners, sheriffs and other officials. Men of his choosing went to the legislature to make laws in accordance with his desires. His long arm extended to other counties, even to the state capital. Candidates for governor sought his support when in quest of the nomination tantamount to election.

Wagner held sound title to his spread. His father had held it before him. From the eastern county line west of Terloga Creek his holdings ran. West of Terloga Creek was what Wagner had always considered open range. He used the grazing land west of the creek, sharing it with other ranches. He had never taken the trouble to get title to it.

Somebody else did. An Eastern syndicate saw opportunity for profit. Carefully investigating, the syndicate learned that title was held by the Gomez family of Texas, rich, respected, of Mexican ancestry. The Gomez family held title by right of an ancient Spanish grant. The syndicate learned that the validity of the grant had been upheld by the Texas courts.

The Gomez family, as a matter of pride, had kept the taxes paid on the land, but otherwise took little interest in it. When approached by the syndicate and offered a fair price, they were only too glad to sell what they considered a holding of little value.

THE SYNDICATE proceeded to cash in on its investment. A number of farmers of east Texas were approached, and interested. The syndicate strung wire, made certain improvements and moved the farmers to the Big Bend country. Before Gordon Wagner and his associates realized what was up, the land west of Terloga Creek to the Presidio County line was occupied by the hated grangers, looked upon by Wagner and his friends as little better than nesters. They held title, also, to acres not yet under cultivation.

The syndicate moved on to other fields and new speculation. The farmers remained, and prospered, despite the constant irritations evolving from the enmity of Gordon Wagner and his fellow cattlemen.

But the crowning infamy, from Wagner's viewpoint, came later. A stretch of land just south of the railroad did not interest the syndicate when they made their deal with the Gomez family. It was hilly and rocky. But on the slopes of the hills and between the rocks grew tall and rich gramma grass. The slopes were too steep for cattle, too drained for profitable farming. But, on the instigation of the Gomez family, the syndicate enclosed the vast pasturage in wire. And Gordon Wagner came near to suffering a stroke of apoplexy when, in the course of a ride over his northern range, he saw a multitude of moving dots of a dirty-white color speckling the amber-green of the grass. Closer investigation discovered the dots to be that anathema of the cowman—sheep!

Old Juan Gomez, a thrifty individual with notions of his own, had decided to put to use the apparently worthless holding left on his hands. The Gomez family was too far away, and too influential, for Wagner to get at. So he proceeded to take

Range Drama of "Bobbed" Wire and Bullets!

it out on the farmers, who were, he firmly believed, the authors of all his troubles. Which was how the situation stood as election day drew near.

Not that Wagner worried about the outcome of the election. He had the votes, or thought he had. But whenever he thought of the opposition ticket headed by Bascomb Price, who was running for judge, he pawed sod on general principles.

JIM HATFIELD

Bascomb Price was a lawyer of rather vague antecedents. He had showed up in the section a few years back and hung out his shingle in Marton, the county seat. He had prospered. For whatever else Bascomb Price might be or have been, he was a lawyer. His knowledge of the law was exceeded only by his knowledge of how it could be evaded.

Price had helped the syndicate draw up its papers. He had won some cases for the farmers, others for small ranch owners. More than once he had opposed Gordon Wagner. And more than once he had come out on top. He was shrewd, resourceful, fearless. He set up to be a liberal. In fact, he was liberal with anything that did not immediately concern the welfare or prosperity of Bascomb Price. Where he himself was concerned, he was considerably more than conservative.

The farmers were solid behind Price's candidacy. They were solid behind anything that opposed Gordon Wagner. But their voting power was not sufficient to swing an election. The cowmen scattered about the great sprawling county, with their hands, commanded a comfortable edge. Gordon Wagner was not worried.

He might have been a trifle more concerned had he been able to follow Bascomb Price that summer and early fall as he rode about the county, pausing at small ranchhouses and chatting with their occupants. For instance, could he have overheard the conversation between Bascomb Price and Chet Johnson one warm and sunny day only a few weeks before election, he would have been very much concerned.

JOHNSON was shiftless, and always in need of money, despite the fact that his spread was a good one and could easily have been prosperous. Bascomb Price pulled up in front of his ramshackle ranchhouse and sat waiting, his long, lanky body lounging easily in the saddle. In a few minutes, Johnson appeared, shambling down the broken steps to pause beside Price's big roan.

"Howdy, Bascomb," he greeted.

Price nodded, and looked expectantly at the ranch owner.

Johnson passed a nervous hand over his stubbly chin.

"Bascomb," he said, "I'm scairt I ain't quite ready to meet that note today, after all."

Price nodded, and asked an unexpected question. "Figure to be in town on election day, Chet?"

Johnson looked surprised. "Why—why I ain't thought much about it," he replied. "Didn't figger there was much reason for takin' the trouble. Elections always go one way in this section."

"I thought maybe," Price said slowly, "that you and your hands might be in town on election day. Thought maybe your cousin Earl Jasper and his boys might be there, too."

Two more raiders went down as Hatfield's guns gushed fire and smoke (CHAP. IX)

JOHNSON rubbed his chin again, and appeared slightly perplexed but thoughtful. He shot a glance at Price, who was staring toward the blue loom of the hills in the west.

"Not in any particular hurry about the money on that note, today," Price said suddenly. "Not today. But I might be the day after election, Chet. Might be—the day after election."

Johnson stared at him again. But now there was a dawning comprehension in his eyes.

"Tell your cousin Earl hello for me when you see him, Chet," Price said, and rode on.

Johnson stared after him, rubbing his chin vigorously.

"By gosh, I've a notion I'd better ride over and see Cousin Earl right now," he muttered aloud. "Might be in a hurry the day after election!"

Price's next stop was at the tight, well kept ranchhouse of Arch Rader. Rader

didn't owe Price money. He didn't owe money to anybody. But, folks said, Arch Rader would skin a flea to get the tallow. Bascomb Price had before now enabled him to make some profitable deals.

The conversation between Price and Rader was also cryptic. Price began with a casual question. "You and your boys figure to be in town on election day, Arch?"

"No," Rader growled. "Why should I waste a day's work to go there and vote for folks what'll be elected anyhow? Gordon Wagner don't need our votes."

Price looked contemplative. His hard blue eyes bored into Rader's filmy gray ones.

"Arch," he said, "if you and your boys happened to be in town on election day, I've a notion I might be able to introduce you to a buyer who'd take that herd you're getting together, at a mite more than the average market price. Uh-huh, I might be able to, if you're in town that day, you and your boys."

Arch Rader had plenty of savvy. He could see into the trunk of a tree considerably farther than most. His tight lips stretched a little in what was probably intended for a grin.

"I'll be there, Bascomb," he promised. "I'll bring the boys with me, and I'll pick the Circle K bunch and bring 'em along, too. Kenton of the Circle K is sort of be-

holden to me, you know."

Bascomb Price visited other small spreads during the next few weeks. The conversations that ensued with their owners bore a singular resemblance to those with Johnson and Rader. They dealt only with business matters. Never with politics.

Price's final visit was to Val Carver, who owned the Cross C. Val Carver was an energetic young man with progressive notions. He had bought the Cross C, a rundown old spread, a few years before and had built it into a valuable property. Carver had had more than one run-in with Gordon Wagner over methods of procedure. He had put Wagner in a snortin' mood by maintaining that the farmers were apt to prove a benefit to the section rather than otherwise. He was shrewd, industrious, and plenty salty when necessary. And he was misguided enough to believe in the ticket that included Bascomb Price for judge and Craig Fulton, owner of the Queen High saloon in Marton, for sheriff.

"Don't reckon we got much chance, Bascomb," he told Price, "but I'll be there with my hands to cast a protest vote against Wagner's shorthorn methods, anyhow."

"You might get a surprise," Price predicted.

Carver smiled deprecatingly. "'Fraid not," he replied. "All the cowmen in the section swing in behind Wagner as a matter of course, but maybe we can poll enough votes to sort of give him a jolt."

THE night before election, Bascomb Price had a visitor who slipped quietly into his darkened office, glided across the room and knocked on an inner door. A bolt slid, the door opened a crack, revealing a closely shuttered room lighted by a hanging lamp.

"Come in," said Price. He quickly closed the door after the other, and bolted it. They sat down on opposite sides of a table under the hanging lamp.

The visitor was a tall, powerfully built man of thirty or a little more. He had a smooth-skinned, deeply tanned complexion, eyes of so dark a blue that in the lamplight they appeared black, a tight-lipped mouth and a long, powerful chin. For a long moment, he regarded Price.

"Well?" he said at length.

"Well," replied the lawyer, "I've done everything I could, and I figure we've nothing to worry about. I've a notion Gordon Wagner is in for a surprise tomorrow."

"You saw everybody, as I told you to?" the visitor asked.

"That's right. Spent a little money where I 'lowed it would do the most good. Never told anybody, directly, to come to town and vote our ticket. Call any one of 'em before a grand jury and they couldn't testify a thing to that effect."

"If there's any grand jury prying into your affairs, it will be about something else 'sides vote buyin'," the other grunted irritably.

Price's teeth showed in what was close to a snarl.

"You don't need to go throwing out hints," he growled.

The other's lips twitched. His eyes seemed to darken.

"Sure wouldn't be throwin' out any hints against a judge," he replied in amused tones.

Bascomb Price looked contemplative. "You know," he remarked, "I've a notion I've got the beginning of a real political career tomorrow."

"Reckon not," the other said dryly, "not with what you got hangin' over your back —where you come from."

The look that darkened the lawyer's face was not nice to see.

"Who would be digging that up?" he demanded.

"Don't know," the other replied, "but somebody might dig it up, if necessary."

"And you needn't be handing out any threats, either," Price snapped.

"I'm not handin' out threats. I'm just tellin' you how things stand," the other replied quietly. "You know it as well as I do. So don't get any highfalutin' notions about goin' respectable. You couldn't do it, Price. You just ain't made that way. You'd rather make one crooked dollar than five honest ones. Besides, you sort of owe me and the boys something. If it wasn't for me, you'd be—somewhere else."

Bascomb Price looked like a cornered rat, but a very dangerous rat. He glared at the other. But when he spoke, his voice held nothing of rancor, only protest.

"The trouble with you, Kenton, is that

you can't see a foot ahead of your nose," he said. "You want to grab off a few pesos because they are close to hand and easy to get. Because of that you can't see the thousands a mite farther on, the thousands we could have if you'd only be a little patient and string along with my notions."

Kenton nodded, gazing steadily at the lawyer. "I admit you got something there, Price," he said. "But I can't see it anything different. The only chance I can see for us is to make a good cleanup as quickly as possible and then trail our twine. How could you stand the advertisin' a political career would bring you? You're smart, all right. I'll admit that. Uh-huh, you got plenty of savvy. But how would you figure that one out?"

"There should be a way, and I've a notion I could figure it out," Price replied slowly.

"Okay," Kenton agreed instantly. "You try and figure it. But a thing like that takes dinero and we ain't got it. And the boys will have to be took care of. They ain't goin' to sit around with empty pockets, twiddlin' their thumbs, and you know it."

"They'll be taken care of," Price assured him. "But we've got to use judgment. I've got some notions I'll put into effect as soon as we get control of things. One of them is to win Gordon Wagner and his bunch over to our side. I can do it."

"Do that, and we'll be settin' purty," nodded Kenton. "The feller I'm scairt of more'n anybody else is that young feller Val Carver. He's got brains, and if things don't work out the way he figures they should, he's liable to make trouble."

"He'll be taken care of," Price promised grimly.

The other nodded, and rose to his feet. "I'll be amblin'," he said, "Want to be back to the hills before daylight. Got a mite of business to attend to. Reckon everybody else, includin' the sheriff, will be busy with election tomorrow."

Price seemed to understand. "We'll need that money," he said. "Be sure you get it."

"I'll get it, all right," the other promised as he took his departure.

GORDON Wagner was in town early the following morning. The election results would depend on the ballots cast in Marton. The scattered vote over the rest of the county was negligible.

Wagner was in a complacent frame of mind. To his way of thinking, the election was hogtied. He was not disturbed when the farmers began to arrive. Their vote would be cast solidly against his ticket. That was a foregone conclusion. But they were not strong enough numerically to change the result. The big spread owners and their hands, who could be counted on to vote in accordance with their employers' wishes, outnumbered the farmers. This election, like those preceding it for many years, would be but a ratification of royal edict from the barons of the range.

But by mid afternoon, Wagner's complacency and peace of mind were things of the past. Aghast, astounded, he watched the unprecedented number of ballots cast. By horseback, buggy, wagon and buckboard, they came—men who had not exercised their right of franchise for years. And Wagner knew very well they had not come to town to vote for the candidates he, Wagner, sponsored.

"Somebody's talked them fellers into comin' to town and vote," Wagner declared to old Judge Crowe, who had held his office for a decade or more.

"One guess," Crowe replied his face grim.

"That blankety-blank Bascomb Price, that's who!" raged Wagner.

"Gordon," the judge said slowly, "I reckon you needn't blame Price over much. The fellers really to blame are you and me and the rest of the boys. We never paid those littler fellers any mind. Never went to the trouble to bring 'em in with us against the time when we'd need 'em. Oh, I know, we didn't used to need 'em. And we never did anything for 'em to make 'em line up with us. We just let 'em slide. We had all the votes we needed without 'em. But now it's a different story. With the farmers, they got enough votes to turn us fellers upside down, and I've a notion that's just what they're goin' to do."

Judge Crowe had a straight notion. Long before the last ballot was counted, the Price ticket had won hands down.

The farmers, and Val Carver, proceeded to go wild.

But they were not looking into the future to see what they were going wild about.

CHAPTER II

In the Tradition

YOUNG Tom Shafer was a Texas Ranger, and very, very proud of it. He hadn't been a Ranger for long, only about three months, but he was fired with the Ranger spirit and steeped in the traditions of the famous corps.

As he sat in the daycoach of the speeding Sunrise Limited, Tom Shafer dwelt with pleasurable anticipation on his coming meeting with Captain Bill McDowell, to whose command he had been assigned. He gazed out of the window, a smile on his fresh young fighter's face.

Down there to the south was the Big Bend country, a land of strange happenings and stirring deeds. Down there were the mysterious, many colored Chisos Mountains, the home of outlaw bands. There, too, was the Comanche Trail, along which the plains Indians raided into Mexico, used now by smugglers and other owlhoots.

The Caballo Mountains, Maravillas Creek, Mule Ear Peaks, Boquillas Pass, the Picotera Mountains, where, tradition says, is a famous lost mine—they are all in the Big Bend, names of adventure, romance and blood. And beyond, the awful gorge that is the Grand Canyon of Santa Helena, where the Rio Grande thunders between towering walls of stone, between the confines of which birds have been known to starve, unable to fly above the walls because of the terrific down draughts.

Tom Shafer hoped Captain McDowell might assign him to duty in the Big Bend, perhaps send him to search out and destroy the notorious Scarlet Riders, so named because of the flaming red handkerchiefs pierced with eye-holes that served them for masks. So, as the Limited thundered westward, young Tom dreamed his dreams.

Suddenly the crackling locomotive exhaust snapped off short. A screaming of tortured metal arose as the brake shoes ground against the wheels. The day coach leaped and bucked as the heavy Pullmans behind crashed the couplers together. Passengers were hurled forward, bruised and battered against the seats in front.

A splintering crash, a last terrific jolt and the train came to a halt. The passengers picked themselves up, yelling and swearing.

The front door banged open. A man strode into the coach. He was a tall man, and broad. His hatbrim was pulled low. His face was swathed in a scarlet handkerchief pierced with eye holes. He held a gun in each hand.

"Elevate!" he shouted in a deep, hoarse voice.

Tom Shafer was on his feet in the aisle when the man entered. He gazed squarely into the black muzzles of the levelled guns.

Through young Tom's mind flashed stories he had heard of Ranger daring in just such a situation, of winning out against seemingly insurmountable odds. Ranger tradition!

But young Tom forgot that Ranger courage is accompanied with cool-headedness and sound judgment. Even Captain McDowell respected the business end of a forty-five trained in his direction. Under such circumstances, Captain Bill would sit tight and hope for a break.

Tom Shafer didn't sit tight. He went for his gun. Before it cleared leather he died, two bullets laced through his heart.

The bandit peered over his smoking Colt.

"Anybody else?" he inquired. "I aim to accommodate."

There was nobody else, the passengers stood rigid with horror, hands reaching for the roof.

OUTSIDE sounded a stutter of shots, then a roaring explosion. The train robbers had hurled a stick of dynamite against the express car door. There were a few more shots, shouted commands, then a few moments of silence shattered by another explosion muffled by the walls of the express car.

Inside the car, as the smoke cleared, the big iron safe lay against the wall, its door sagging crazily from one hinge. Nearby lay the dead express messenger.

There was fifty thousand dollars in the safe. It didn't stay there long. A few minutes later it went into the brush with the owlhoots.

Captain McDowell was at the station

when the Limited, hours late, paused at Franton to unload its grisly cargo. As he gazed on the face of young Tom Shafer, comely even in death, his own craggy features were bleak as chiseled granite.

Tom Shafer's father had been a lifelong friend of McDowell's. It was McDowell who brought about young Tom's appointment to the Rangers.

"Thought I was doin' the boy a favor," McDowell muttered to himself. "Maybe I was. But it's hard to see it at a time like this."

While repairs were being made to the pilot and engine front, smashed when the locomotive plowed into the mass of stone and logs heaped on the track by the bandits, Captain McDowell questioned passengers and train crew, with scant results. All were agreed, however, that the masked robbers were the notorious Scarlet Riders, and that the man who killed Tom Shafer was the leader of the band.

McDowell walked slowly back to his office. As he neared the building which fronted to the north on the main street of the town, he suddenly uttered an exultant exclamation.

"Blazes! Knew he'd get in today or tomorrow, but the big jigger seems always to show up right when he's needed most. Hi-yuh, Jim! Almighty glad to see you!"

The man riding out of the sunset waved a greeting to the Ranger Captain. A moment later he dismounted with lithe grace and strode forward, leaving his magnificent golden sorrel horse securely tied to the evening breeze.

Captain McDowell was himself a stalwart six-footer, but he had to raise his glance considerably to meet Jim Hatfield's level and rather long green eyes.

"How are you, suh?" Hatfield asked in a deep, musical voice, a very fitting voice to come out of his great chest. "Anything wrong?"

"Plenty," grunted McDowell. "Come on into the office and I'll tell you about it. I'll send Chuck out to take care of Goldy's needs."

In terse sentences, Captain McDowell acquainted Hatfield with the outrage on the Sunrise Limited.

THE MAN a stern old Lieutenant of Rangers had named the Lone Wolf listened in silence. His sternly handsome,

Hatfield shot him dead center and he went down kicking and clawing (CHAP. V)

hawk-nosed face remained composed, but the color of his steady eyes seemed to subtly change from the sunny green of a summer sea to the cold gray of a glacier lake under a stormy sky.

"Know anything about those jiggers you call the Scarlet Riders?" he asked when McDowell paused.

"Not over much," the commander of the Border Battalion replied. "They been swallerforkin' around the Bend for a while. Runnin' off some cows, holdin' up a stage, grabbin' one of the Terlingua quicksilver mine payrolls. Never anything over big till this train robbery. Got their name from the red handkerchiefs they wear for masks."

"Where do they hang out?"

"That's a question," said McDowell. "Some folks say the Chisos Mountains. Others 'low they hole up in the Carmens down in Mexico. My notion is the Del Nortes or the Santiagos, west of Marton. That's hole-in-the-wall country for fair. That gives 'em a natural sweep into the Marathon Basin, which is one of the oldest sedimentary formations on the North American Continent.

"The peaks to the west and south used to be Indian lookouts, and I reckon the owlhoots put 'em to the same use nowadays. Plenty of cows in the Marathon, and on the Toboso Flats to the east. Mines in the Chisos, with stage routes runnin' to 'em. Plenty of pickin's for a salty bunch with savvy."

"What kind of local enforcement officers over there?"

"Always been pretty good. The sheriff of the county is okay, and I reckon he got re-elected today. Haven't heard the result of the returns, yet, but the county has always been safe for the regular party."

Captain McDowell paused again. Hatfield gazed at him expectantly, but in silence. The Captain tugged his mustache, hesitated, seemed to make a resolve.

"I'm always in the notion to leave such mavericks to the local authorities, so far as possible," he resumed slowly. "Usually they don't amount to anything a good sheriff can't handle. We've got enough to do without skalleyhootin' after every stray cow widelooper who shows up. But what happened today on the train sort of changes the picture."

McDowell paused again to stuff tobacco into his pipe. He got the pipe going strongly, and blew out a cloud of smoke.

"That chore down on the Border I wired you about can't wait, Jim," he said. "Captain Brooks is expectin' you and needs you and the boys I'm sendin' with you. It may take considerable time, but after it's cleaned up, suppose you amble up into the Bend and give things a once over. Okay?"

Hatfield nodded.

"Always heard it's a nice country in that section," he remarked.

"Huh!" snorted the Captain. "Nice for horned toads and sidewinders! There's hellions in that section ornery enough to eat off the same plate with a snake!"

The Lone Wolf looked pleased.

CHAPTER III

"Law" Officer

WITH the election results officially confirmed, in due time, Craig Fulton, owner of the Queen High saloon in Marton, took over the sheriff's office. He immediately appointed as deputies one of his bartenders, a former cowhand, and his chief dealer, to the infinite disgust of Gordon Wagner and his associates.

"Decent folks might as well move out of the section right now!" stormed Wagner.

He was in an even stormier mood when he tore into town the following week and shook his fist under Sheriff Fulton's nose.

"Started already, eh?" he bellowed.

"What's started?" asked the sheriff. "What's the matter?"

"What's the matter?" mimicked Wagner. "A hundred prime beefs stole from my west pasture, and one of my hands with a bullet busted shoulder! That's what's the matter!"

The sheriff remained calm.

"When did it happen?" he wanted to know.

"Happened this mornin', in broad daylight," rumbled Wagner. "The sidewinders don't even take the trouble to wait till it's dark any more. They know they ain't got nothin' to worry about."

"Which way did they go?" Fulton asked quietly.

"Which way would they go but west into the hills!" snorted Wagner. "My boys are hightailin' after 'em, but they got a good start and they know the country, of course. My beefs are gone."

"Reckon they took the Terlingua Trail, which would mean they'd circle south," mused the sheriff.

Within ten minutes, Sheriff Fulton and his two deputies rode out of town, headed west by south. Wagner watched them go, with sneers and profanity.

There was a different expression on his bad-tempered old face two days later, however, when Sheriff Fulton and his deputies returned. Ahead of them trudged a herd of weary, disgusted cattle. Behind trudged two lead horses bearing meaningless Mexican brands. Roped to the saddle of each horse was a dead man.

"There were two or three more of the sidewinders," explained the sheriff. "They give us the slip; but we got the cows and brung along them two back there as souvenirs."

"A good chore," Wagner admitted grudgingly.

Sheriff Fulton nodded. "Wagner, I know you ain't got no use for me," he said. "I know you figger I ain't worth a hoot. But maybe I'll do a better chore than you figger. I got a lot to learn, but I aim to do my duty as I see it. Nobody is goin' to make trouble in this county and get by with it so long as I can help it."

Wagner was still not thoroughly convinced. He couldn't resist another sneer. "Suppose you'll be bringin' in the Scarlet Riders next!"

"That," the sheriff admitted frankly, "is considerable of a chore. It's a plumb salty bunch with somebody runnin' it who's got plenty of savvy. They know every crack and gully over to the west, which is more than I do. They 'pear to always know what's goin' on. Sheriff Snyder wasn't no snide, but he didn't have much luck against 'em. I'll do my best, Wagner, and that's all anybody can do. Why can't you give me credit for that, even though you and me don't always see eye-to-eye on everything?"

After arranging for the care of his recovered herd, Gordon Wagner went off in a thoughtful mood.

YOUNG Val Carver of the Cross C was exultant. "Knowed we was backin' the right horse," he told the gathering of the farmers. "Fulton won't stand for no nonsense from anybody, and Judge Price will back him to the limit. I figger we're in for better times hereabouts."

Bascomb Price heard of what Carver said, and grinned. Price grinned again, that night, when the man he called Kenton visited him in his office.

"See you put it over, all right," he chuckled. "Wagner is plumb pleased about getting his cows back, and he's beginning to feel uncertain about Fulton."

"Nothin' to it," returned the tall Kenton. "The boys grabbed off the herd easy. That fool cowhand showed up while they were runnin' 'em off Wagner's range and they had to plug him. They thought he was done for, but he evidently come to after they rode off. Lucky he didn't get his senses back too soon or we might have had trouble. Wagner has got some cold propositions ridin' for him and if they had caught up with the boys before they got in the clear, there would have been trouble."

"That cowhand didn't get a good look at any of the boys?" Price asked rather anxiously.

"Nope. They took care of that. Remember, it was daylight. The boys had handkerchiefs—black handkerchiefs—tied over their faces."

"Where did Fulton come up with you?"

"We were waitin' down in the south pass. Had the cows holed up in a canyon. We shoved 'em out and started him back to town with 'em."

Bascomb Price nodded. Suddenly a thought seemed to strike him.

"Who were the two fellers Fulton packed into town with him?" he asked.

Kenton shrugged his broad shoulders. "I don't know," he replied. "They were a couple of chuckline ridin' cowhands what come along while we were helpin' Fulton get started. Said they were headin' for New Mexico."

"They suspected something?"

"Nope. Why should they?"

"Then why did you have to cash them in?"

"Didn't have to," Kenton replied, his thin lips stretching in a wolfish grin. "I just figgered it would make Fulton's hand look stronger if he brought a couple of

bodies along with the cows."

Price stared at the other, met his darkly blue, glowing eyes regarding him speculatively, and shuddered.

"Kenton, sometimes I wonder if you aren't the devil himself," he said slowly.

The other grinned again.

"No sense in doin' things half way," he replied composedly.

"You never do," Price agreed with emphasis. "You always go the whole way. But I wish you hadn't had to down that blasted Ranger on the train that day."

"Didn't know he was a Ranger," Kenton replied. "Not that it would have made any difference. He was reachin', and I had to let him have it. I'm beginnin' to think the Rangers are a mite over-rated. That one showed plenty of guts, but he sure didn't show no judgment. And guts ain't enough to get you by."

"There are Rangers who've got guts and judgment, too," Price said grimly. "I haven't felt right since that happened. I've been expecting McDowell to send a troop over here because of it. And we don't want a bunch of those devils snooping around. Things are hot on the Border farther east just now, though, and McDowell is pretty busy. Besides, I learned that young feller you killed had been with the Rangers only a few months. Perhaps he was hardly considered one of them yet."

"Me and the boys will take care of any Rangers what happen along," Kenton replied composedly. "You just handle your end here, and I'll take care of mine. Did you get the lowdown on that shipment? Yeah? Good! Let's have the line-up. Ninety thousand dollars! Whe-ew! And you're sure it's goin' to be handled that way?

"Well, reckon there is something to be-in' a judge and a political boss. Okay, we'll start in the mornin'. Got several days ride ahead of us. Don't worry about me handlin' it. I know every inch of that section over there, and I got my plans made. Somebody is sure in for a surprise."

NEXT ISSUE'S NOVEL

THE RIMROCK RAIDERS

By JACKSON COLE

CHAPTER IV

Rough Stuff on the Rio

A STRANGE river is the Rio Grande. Rising in the San Juan Mountains of southwestern Colorado, it flows eastward eighty miles as a mountain stream, then enters the San Luis valley where its course changes to south. It crosses into New Mexico through the Rio Grand Canyon. Across the state its course is through a series of arid basins and canyons cut in the tranverse ridges, the last of which are El Paso Canyon and El Paso Valley. From the latter point to its mouth, the river forms the boundary, a continually shifting boundary, between Texas and Mexico.

Essentially a storm water stream subject to great and sudden floods, the Rio Grande is startling in the extreme fluctuations in its volume. The river may be dry at El Paso when its lower course is overflowing its banks. The stream is often referred to as a mile wide and a foot deep, too thin to plow and too thick to drink. But the description does not hold good when the river is in flood, a raging torrent flowing 600,000 cubic feet a second.

Jim Hatfield, standing on the foredeck of the steamboat, *Ranchero*, pondered the river's erratic behaviour as he watched the old stern-wheeler butt her stubby prow into the churning yellow waves. The *Ranchero* was flat-bottomed and a shallow draught. But she was powerfully engined and made good progress against the current.

It was seldom that the big steamboat ever followed the course of the river this far west. Usually, Laredo or Del Rio was about her upstream limit. More often she nosed around Rio Grande City and Brownsville, and from there to the mouth of the river.

This trip was out of the ordinary. She had been chartered at Del Rio to transport a group of settlers to the east rincon of the Big Bend, where friends with wagons would meet them and carry them to their new homes in the northern reaches of the Bend. Their goods had already been sent overland by covered wagon. The voices of women and children mingled

with the steady bat of the paddles and the cheerful "chow-chow" of the exhaust.

Hatfield glanced toward the aft deck where Goldy, his big sorrel, stood in a stall constructed of heavy planks. He raised his gaze to the low hills a quarter of a mile to the north, fixing on what only the keen eyes of the Lone Wolf had noted.

"Funny," he mused, "there's a jigger on horseback over on the lower slopes who's been pacing us all afternoon. Wonder why he's so interested in this old flat-bottom? Of course, he may be just a chuck line riding cowboy taking it easy. But he sure has been keeping an eye on us."

AT THE same moment, Hatfield himself was under discussion. The captain and mate of the steamer stood near the rail and talked together in low tones.

"He's a salty lookin' hombre, that big cowboy," said the captain, a wizened old-timer. "Look at them eyes, and the way them guns is slung. A two-gun, quick-drawn man or I miss my guess. 'Pears to pack influence somewhere. When he came aboard at Del Rio, he had a letter from Kennedy, the owner, orderin' us to build a pen for that yaller horse. He's gettin' off at Dawes Landin', same as the farmers."

"Chances are he's just a cowhand movin' from one ranch to another," replied the mate. "Kennedy is always anxious to please the cattlemen. Most of the business his boats do comes from them, you know."

"Reckon that's right," the captain agreed. "Guess I'm just jumpy, with nigh onto a hundred thousand dollars in specie in the cabin. That's the real reason for this trip, you know. Takin' the farmers is just a sort of blind. Kennedy learned they were headin' for the Bend and made 'em an attractive offer. The bank figgers shippin' the dinero this way is a smart move, considerin' the trouble they been havin' on the railroad and the stages of late."

"May not be so smart when they're packin' it from the Landin' up into the Bend," observed the mate.

"Oh, nobody would think of lookin' in a farm wagon for anything to steal," deprecated the captain. "And the shipment's been kept a dead secret."

"Don't anything seem to be kept a secret in this country of late," the mate grunted pessimistically. "Well, we should make the Landin' before midnight, and unload in the mornin'. After that, it's no concern of ours. Just the same, though, I'm keepin' my gun handy."

"Me, too," agreed the captain. "Pedro is on the lookout, too. And that shuck pilot is something to go up against."

"I'm more scairt of him than anything else," grunted the mate, with his usual gloom. "Did you ever see such a face! But he sure knows every snag and sandbank in this river, and where the channel is, all the time. He's took a course up river like a snake through a cactus patch, and ain't grounded once."

The sun was low in the west and the yellow flood of the Rio Grande was shot with glimmers of gold and blotches of bloody scarlet. Purple shadows were climbing the lower slopes of the hills to the north. Their crests were ringed about with saffron flame. To the south, the many-colored mountains of Mexico glowed and smoldered in the dying light.

Hatfield raised his glance to the pilot house. He waved his hand, and smiled. He had taken a liking to the young Mexican pilot, despite his remarkable and somewhat unprepossessing appearance.

Pedro was tall and lean, slender with the slenderness of a rapier blade. His dark face was seamed and puckered with the scars of knife wounds. He had a long, drooping nose set very much to one side over his thin-lipped mouth that nevertheless was grin-quirked at the corners. His eyes were unusual, to say the least. Old knife work had left one eyelid hanging continually lower than the other, lending to his otherwise sinister face a droll and unexpected waggery.

Pedro waved an answer to the tall Ranger, one eye glowering, the other leering, while his crooked but very white teeth flashed in a grin.

Hatfield walked over to where the captain stood by the rail. "Understand you figure to make the Landing during the night, suh," he remarked.

"That's right," the captain agreed. "At the rate we're goin', we had oughta make it by ten or eleven o'clock. Then we'll tie up and unload in the mornin'."

"If you don't mind, suh, I'll unload as soon as we tie up," Hatfield answered. "Got a long ride ahead of me, and it's cooler at night, this time of the year."

"Okay," the captain agreed. "I'll drop

the gangplank for you and you can go ahead as you plan."

THE sun went down in a riot of scarlet and gold. The flaming sky dimmed to cold gray that swiftly deepened to velvety black. The stars came out, dots of light that seemed to brush the hilltops. The broad band of the flooded river became vague and elusive, the wave crests flecked with phosphorescent fire. Pedro leaned over the wheel, peering ahead with his mismated eyes and deftly twirling the spokes as he sought out the channel, which here was not far from the north bank.

A couple of hours after sunset, Hatfield helped Goldy to a portion of oats, gave him a rub-down and got the rig on him.

"Want to be all ready to hit the trail as soon as we tie up," he told the sorrel. "I've a notion a stretching will be good for your legs."

Another hour passed, and Hatfield estimated that they were only a few miles south of Dawes Crossing, the point of disembarkation. He lounged close to Goldy's stall, smoking a cigarette and thinking deeply.

Without warning it happened. There was a terrific crash, a grinding and jolting. The boat came to a stop as if gripped by a giant hand. Everyone was hurled headlong to the deck.

Mad confusion followed. Hatfield heard Pedro's bellowed oaths as he twirled the spokes. The exhaust snapped off. The beat of the paddles ceased. The *Ranchero* swung crazily as the current gripped her. In the fore part of the boat there appeared an ominous glow that grew in intensity. Up the steel ladder, the half-breed stokers swarmed from the shallow engine room.

Half dazed by the shock of his fall, Hatfield scrambled to his feet. Inside the stall, Goldy snorted and squealed, but apparently had taken no serious hurt.

"Pedro slipped up," Hatfield muttered, rubbing his bruised head. "Must have hit a sandbank or a submerged ledge. Sounded like it ripped her whole bow out. Good gosh! everybody is going loco!"

The boat was indeed a pandemonium of screams and yells. The captain was bellowing for order. Pedro's curses rose high above the tumult.

Something bumped and grated against the *Ranchero's* side. Hatfield thought they had grounded on the ledge. Then over the rail scrambled a man. He had a gun in his hand, a mask of red cloth across his face. After him came another and another.

As Hatfield stared in astonishment, a gun cracked. The captain yelled with pain and reeled sideways, clutching at his blood spouting arm.

"Elevate!" roared the gun wielder. "The first hellion to make a move gets it. Stop that yellin'."

Jim Hatfield made a move. His hands streaked down and up. Both his Colts let go with a rippling crash.

The foremost gun wielder hurtled back as if a huge fist had taken him in the chest. He hit the rail, spun across it and plunged into the water. A second man went down, kicking and clawing on the deck. Over the rail surged three more masked men, shooting as they came.

FROM the pilot house streaked fire. One of the newcomers went back over the rail. The old captain, game as they make 'em, picked up his fallen gun with his left hand and banged away at the owlhoots. Hatfield's sixes boomed again, and another man went down. The others vanished back over the rail. Hatfield heard their boots thud on the bottom of the boat from which they had come. He bounded forward, stuffing fresh cartridges into his empty guns.

From the river bank sounded the boom of a rifle. A heavy slug whined past Hatfield's head. He whirled, leaped to Goldy's stall and snatched his Winchester from the saddle boot. He sent a stream of lead hissing toward slowy forms showing on the bank. Answering bullets stormed about him, kicked splinters from the deck, thudded against the pilot house.

Then the current gripped the *Ranchero* with full force and hurled her toward the middle of the river. In a moment they were sweeping down stream and out of range.

Hatfield ran to the wounded captain.

"Hurt much?" he asked.

"Just a hole through the meat; I'll be all right," the captain replied. "Tie it up in a minute."

"Do you know what this is all about?" Hatfield urged.

"Money shipment in the cabin. They were after it, and didn't get it, thanks largely to you, cowboy. They—good gosh! the boat's a-fire!"

It was, decidedly so. Flames were crackling and roaring in the *Ranchero's* bow.

"Oil and bacon up there," said the captain. "We'll never get it out." His voice rose to a bellow.

"Pedro! Head her for the shore, and hold her there! We gotta unload."

Pedro was jangling the engine room bell madly.

"Power!" he bawled back. "Give me power! How can I steer without power! Get the engines going!"

The captain lurched to the engine room hatch, wringing the blood from his dripping fingers. No answer came to his repeated bellows. The *Ranchero* continued to drift and spin. The flames leaped higher. The screams of frightened women, the crying of children and the shouts of men raised a bedlam of horrid sound.

Hatfield shouldered the captain aside. He dropped down the steel runged ladder to the floor of the engine-room. Instantly two things caught his eye. One was a film of water sloshing over the floor. The other was the crumpled and unconscious form of the engineer. He was bleeding from a wound above his right eye.

"Butted his head into something when she hit, and knocked himself out," Hatfield thought.

WITH no apparent effort, he lifted the engineer's heavy form and draped it over his shoulder. With the water sloshing over his boots, he strode to the ladder and mounted it. Reaching the deck, he laid the unconscious man on the boards.

"Look after him," he told the captain and the mate. He turned, shouted to the pilot, "Pedro, can you hold her against the bank till the folks are off?"

"*Si, Capitan,*" Pedro shouted back. "As soon as I find a point low enough. "Give me power, and I'll hold her till I burn!"

"Good man!" Hatfield called. "You'll get the power."

He dropped down the ladder again. A glance told him the water was rising. From the bow came an angry glow. The fire had already eaten through the deck boards. Smoke was swirling about and growing thicker.

Hatfield opened the throttle, cautiously. Instantly the great cranks began to turn, the huge arms leading to the paddle wheel to rise and fall. The steady beat of the paddles sounded, and the muffled thudding of the exhaust. He widened the throttle, felt the boat answer to the wheel as Pedro twirled the spokes.

But the steam was falling rapidly. He flung open the furnace door and heaved in billets of oil soaked wood. The flames roared up. He closed the door and opened the blower wide to secure a forced draught. He glanced at the water glass, saw that the water was dangerously low. But steam pressure was the great need now. He'd have to take a chance on burning the boiler and causing an explosion that would blow the engine room, and him, to Mexico. Anxiously he watched the needle of the steam gauge rise. It reached the pressure limit. The safety valve opened with a hiss and roar.

But Hatfield realized that Pedro was having trouble. The mighty current of

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the swollen Rio Grande was forcing the clumsy boat toward midstream.

"Got to have more power," he muttered.

Reaching up, he shoved the weight on the safety valve arm clean to the last notch. He found a heavy wrench and hung that on the end of the arm also. Then he grimly watched the needle waver past the safety mark and keep on going.

The *Ranchero* answered to the accelerated beat of the paddles. Hatfield felt her nose come about.

He felt something else, too. The sting of sparks showering down on him through the open hatch. The fire was sweeping back. Any moment, flames might cut off his only exit from the smoke filled waterlogged engine room.

Steam was hissing from the ash pan, where the water was creeping in over the hot coals. At this rate, it would soon be high enough to drown the fire in the furnace.

Batting out the sparks that smouldered on his shirt, Hatfield went back to stoking the furnace. In the pilot house above, with flame and smoke wreathing about him, the singed Pedro twirled the spokes and cursed the day he was born.

HATFIELD was almost thrown off balance by a sudden jar. The *Ranchero's* stern swung around. The paddles churned the water madly. Pedro had nosed her against the bank and was holding her there at a sharp angle. Hatfield heard the bang and rattle of the lowered gangplank, and a thud of feet racing across the deck. He tried the last water gauge cock, and got a hiss of dry steam.

"Liable to let go any minute," he muttered, glancing at the still rising steam gauge needle.

A tongue of flame flickered over the hatch opening, withdrew, flickered again. Smoke billowed down, causing Hatfield to cough and strangle. Once more the glowing tongue writhed over the opening. This time it did not withdraw altogether. Hatfield watched it grimly, turned and hurled more wood into the furnace.

Suddenly he was aware of a lessening of the noise above decks. He felt the *Ranchero* swing around, lurch, begin to move swiftly.

Down the hatch came a wailing cry. "Come, *Capitan,* come! All are ashore! Come quickly!"

Hatfield swarmed up the ladder. The hot rungs scorched his hands. He gasped as he went through the welter of flame and smoke that blanketed the opening. An instant later and he was on deck, beating out the fire that smouldered in his clothes. Beside him was Pedro, burned and blackened, but with one eye leering roguishly. The *Ranchero* was hurtling downstream, her whole forepart a welter of flame.

Hatfield raced to where Goldy stamped and squealed in his pen. He flung down the bars, led the quivering horse from the stall and swung into the saddle.

"Up behind me," he told Pedro. "We'll let Goldy take it. He'll clear the boat for us and we'll unfork and swim soon as we hit the water."

Pedro clambered up behind the cantle and gripped Hatfield around the waist. The Lone Wolf's voice rang out, "Take it, feller! Trail!"

Goldy took it. He soared over the rail like a bird on the wing and hit the water far out from the careening boat. Instantly Hatfield and Pedro slipped from his back, and when they broke surface, Hatfield veered Goldy's nose to the left and they set out at a long slant for the north bank, breasting the current with strong strokes. Far ahead, the *Ranchero* roared downstream, spouting flame and smoke like a volcano.

"She won't last long," Hatfield muttered.

At that instant the *Ranchero* blew up with a tremendous explosion. Flaming timbers hurtled through the air, struck the water with hissing splashes and vanished from view. Darkness descended on the yellow water.

"Just in time," Hatfield shouted to Pedro. "We'd have taken a long trip to somewhere if we'd still been on her."

Pedro gulped a reply, and after that they saved their breath for the struggle with the river.

The current was strong and they were swept a long way downstream before at last they sloshed through the shallows and sank exhausted on a stretch of sandy beach beneath a shelving bank.

FOR several minutes they lay resting. Then they emptied the water from their boots, wrung out their clothes as

best they could and climbed the bank to the prairie above.

"We'll ride upstream till we run onto the others," Hatfield decided. "You say they all got ashore?"

"Every one," Pedro replied.

"You did a fine job, feller, holding her against the bank all that time," Hatfield congratulated his companion. "It must have been almighty hot in that wheel house."

"*Si,*" Pedro agreed, "it was. But," he added dryly, "I could escape whenever it got too hot, which was more than you could do from that engine room had the deck fallen in and torn down the ladder."

"Was too darn busy to think about it," Hatfield chuckled as they cantered westward over the prairie. "Say," he exclaimed a few minutes later, "don't I see fires ahead?"

"Si," Pedro agreed. "The farmers have made camp on the bank."

They rode on toward the winking fires. They were a few hundred yards distant when a deep, harsh voice challenged them from the shadows of a clump of thicket.

"Halt!"

Hatfield pulled Goldy to a stop. "Okay, feller," he called. "Look us over. I'm coming ahead, slow."

"Come ahead," the other replied, "but don't try no tricks. I got a bead on you, and I don't miss."

Hatfield paced Goldy slowly toward the thicket. A moment more, and a lank farmer stepped from concealment, rifle in hand, peering with out-thrust neck.

"Praise the Lord for His mercies!" he suddenly boomed. "Both of you alive! We never expected to see either of you again. Come on to camp and let the folks thank you for what you did."

"Everybody okay?" Hatfield asked as he shook hands with the farmer.

"Everybody fine," the other replied. "All got ashore without so much as a burn. We even packed along most all of our blankets and other truck, includin' gunny sacks of coffee and bacon and corn pone. Reckon you fellers could stand a few cups, steamin' hot. You look a mite damp and chilly. Come on. Abner Hatch is holed up in that other brush heap over there, keepin' an eye on things down this way. We ain't takin' no chances with those ornery galoots, though I reckon they got a bellyful."

The hardy farmers, accustomed to taking misadventure in their stride, had already set up a comfortable camp on the river bank. The children were asleep on blanket-beds. The women, of the same stern stock as the husbands and fathers, were cooking over the fires.

Hatfield and Pedro were greeted with enthusiasm. After several cups of coffee, some crisply fried bacon and corn pone, and a drying out at one of the fires, Hatfield sought the captain of the *Ranchero.*

The captain's bullet punctured arm was swatched in bandages, but otherwise he appeared little the worse for wear.

"Every last sack," the captain chuckled. "It was considerable work—ninety thousand dollars in gold is a mite hefty—but we did it. The farmers pitched in and helped. They're a cool lot, them fellers. They sloshed water on the fire, smokin' their pipes and takin' it as easy as if they were at a picnic. Packed most all of their truck ashore with 'em, too. I figger they didn't hardly leave a blanket or a skillet behind."

"They're the breed that made this country what it is," Hatfield returned gravely.

"Reckon that's so," the captain agreed. "And I reckon, too," he added, "that them blankety-blank Scarlet Riders got their come-uppance proper for once. Two of 'em went into the water, and I don't figger they come up again. Three more, or what was left of 'em, got roasted along with the boat. I've a notion you plugged one on the bank with your rifle, judgin' from the way he squalled."

Hatfield eyed the captain. "The Scarlet Riders?" he repeated.

"That's right," the captain said. "I saw the red masks they were wearin'. That's the bunch what has been operatin' in the upper Bend. I heard about 'em my last trip up this way. They're the bunch that robbed The Sunrise Limited on Election Day and killed a Texas Ranger. They always wear red masks. That's how they got their name. A bad bunch, all right. And, son, they'll sure be lookin' for you, that is if they got a line on you tonight or learn later it was you busted up their little try for the Terlingua Mine dinero."

HATFIELD nodded. However, he was inclined to discount the captain's

notion that the Scarlet Riders of the upper Bend were responsible for the attack on the *Ranchero*. Hatfield knew that wearing a distinctive badge of some sort was an old owlhoot trick, designed to build up an element of fear in prospective victims. He knew also that once a band had acquired such a reputation, imitators quickly sprang up. He suspected that the owlhoots who attacked the steamer were trading on the sinister reputation of the notorious Scarlet Riders.

"The real bunch in the upper Bend would hardly be working way over here, several days' ride from their hangout," he told himself. Aloud he remarked to the captain:

"Wonder how they knew you were packing that dinero?"

"That's one I'd like to have answered," the captain growled. "Nobody but the bank, the Terlingua Mine and the boat line officials were supposed to know about it. But them blasted Scarlet Riders 'pear to know everything. What I'd like to know, too, is how come Pedro happened to hit that rock. He knows the river from one end to the other. Never knowed him to do anything like that before."

Hatfield had his own notion relative to the explanation of the mystery, but he refrained from comment at the moment.

"Suppose the wagons will be at Dawes Landing waiting for the farmers to show up?" he observed.

"Uh-huh, reckon they will, and the wagon to pack the dinero up to the Terlingua, too," the captain replied. "They'll be wonderin' what happened when we don't show up come mornin'."

"We should be within ten miles of the landing," Hatfield said. "As soon as it's light, I'll ride up there and tell them what happened. Then they can run the wagons down here and pick up their loads."

"That'll help a lot," the captain replied gratefully. "Reckon me and Pedro and the other boys can hire horses or rigs at the Dawes ranch to take us back to Del Rio."

"Wouldn't be surprised," Hatfield agreed. "Dang shame about the boat."

"Oh, Kennedy has plenty more of them old tubs," the captain replied. "Besides, she was insured. We saved the dinero, and nobody got hurt bad, which is the important thing. Well, my arm don't feel so good and I'm tired. I figger to try and knock off a mite of shuteye. The farmers are keepin' watch."

Hatfield felt this was an example worth following. So, after making sure that Goldy, after a good rub-down, was grazing contentedly nearby, he rolled up in a borrowed blanket beside one of the fires and slept soundly till dawn.

He was in the saddle shortly after daybreak, however, and riding west along the river bank.

For several miles Hatfield rode slowly, scanning the turbulent water with eyes that missed nothing. He was perhaps three miles above the site of the camp when he pulled Goldy to a halt and stared at a swirling riffle fifty yards or so out from the bank.

THAT miniature rapid said plainly that directly beneath the surface was a submerged ledge. Hatfield could even see the glimmer of the dark stone as the water rolled over it.

"That's what we hit, all right," he muttered. "But how come it to be so pat with where those hellions were waiting? Right in mid channel, too. Pedro must have known about it. Something funny about this."

He rode closer and gazed down the shelving bank. Plain to see was the high water mark, several feet above the present level of the river's surface. And Hatfield knew that the waters of the Rio Grande had not receded for a week.

Turning, he gazed up stream. About a hundred yards distant, the river made a sharp bend. The north shore was on the outside of the curve.

Hatfield rode on until he reached the bend. Suddenly he uttered a sharp exclamation, and pulled Goldy to a halt.

At the apex of the curve was a sand spit that extended outward for a score of feet. And from the tip of the spit extended a line of rough cribbing built of stout tree trunks and filled with boulders. Hatfield gave a low whistle.

"Plenty of savvy," he thought. "Uh-huh, that bunch have wrinkles on their horns, all right! Built that cribbing out into the stream at just the right angle to shunt the current away from the channel and toward the middle of the river. Before the water could overcome the eddy set up by the abrupt change of direction, the full flow

was beyond that underwater ledge. As a consequence, the water in the channel is lowered considerably where it passes over the reef.

"And what Pedro always knew for a safe crossing is changed so that jagged ledge is set to rip the bottom out of even a shallow draught boat like the *Ranchero* was. Of all the smart tricks! Somebody isn't a snide at mathematics and engineering principles to figure the proper angle to set that cribbing, and what the result would be. This is getting interesting."

The concentration furrow was deep between his dark brows as he rode westward at a fast clip, a sure sign the Lone Wolf was doing some hard thinking.

Dawes Landing had been the site of a military post during the wars with the Indians. Now it was a huddle of shacks and false-fronts. It accommodated the scattered ranches of the section, the largest and most prosperous being the spread that gave the settlement its name. There was a Mexican settlement across the river and the landing was a minor point of entry. It was more than a minor port for the smuggling industry, Hatfield shrewdly surmised, the Comanche Trail being not far off.

There was an unwonted activity around the Landing that morning. On the outskirts of the settlement were clustered a dozen huge covered wagons. Attending them were a group of bronzed and bearded farmers. Hatfield rode up to the wagons and called the farmers together. In terse sentences he related the *Ranchero's* mishap and relayed the message sent by their friends.

The grangers listened in silence until the tale was finished. Their leader, a lanky individual with a brown face that did not move a muscle, scrutinized Hatfield keenly, fingering his grizzled beard the while.

"It's a funny soundin' yarn," he observed frankly, "but you look to be a reg'lar sort of feller, even though you are a cowhand. And the boat didn't get here last night as she was supposed to, that's sure for certain. Reckon you're dealin' straight with us. We'll hitch up and drive down there."

Hatfield received the comment with a smile. He understood the people he was dealing with.

"You say the fellers who attacked the boat wore red handkerchiefs over their faces?" the old man commented. "Well, I reckon they might have been them Scarlet Riders fellers we've heard so much about."

HATFIELD had no trouble picking out the Terlingua Mine wagon with the teamster and two swampers sent to fetch the gold shipment. After the farmers had departed to hitch up, the mine teamster drew Hatfield aside.

"Did the boat manage to unload her cargo?" he asked casually.

"The really valuable part," Hatfield replied, his eyes steady on the other's face.

The wagoner nodded. "Then we'll mosey down there, too," he announced, understanding perfectly the Lone Wolf's reply.

He fingered his chin for a moment, shot Hatfield a shrewd glance.

"Them grangers," he remarked, with a hitch of his thumb toward the other wagons, "they don't believe it was the Scarlet Riders who tackled the boat. They figger it was just another trick of the big ranchers to make them trouble. What do you think?"

"Doesn't look reasonable, does it, that the ranchers, no matter how they may be on the prod against the farmers, would go in for what might easily be wholesale murder, would it?" Hatfield countered.

"Nope," the other replied soberly, "it don't. And there ain't no doubt in my mind but what it was the Scarlet Riders, all right. You say the crew fought 'em off?"

"That's right," Hatfield replied.

"Well, they must have done a good job of fightin'," declared the other. "Hope we're done with the sidewinders, but I figger we ain't. They evidently know just what's goin' on, and they'll make another try for that gold if they get half a chance. I'll bet on that."

"You fellers roll down from the upper Bend with the farmers?" Hatfield asked.

"That's right."

"What excuse did you give for joining up with them?"

"Comin' down to pick up a load of minin' machinery the boat would unload," the teamster replied.

"The mine ever do that before?"

"Not that I ever heerd tell of," the other admitted.

HATFIELD regarded him curiously. "Well," he said sententiously, "it looks to me as if you might just as well have painted on your wagon in letters a foot high what you were coming down here for. Especially coming in a light wagon totally different from those big covered wains."

The teamster shot Hatfield a startled look. He tugged hard at the lobe of his left ear.

"Dad blame it!" he growled querulously. "Now you got me plumb worried. I've a notion everybody knows what we'll be packin'."

"Well, it's pretty well advertised," Hatfield agreed dryly. "All those farmers down there and the boat crew know what's in those sacks. The captain had to tell them so they'd help pack 'em ashore."

The teamster swore explosively. "Sure looks like we're up against it," he growled. He tugged his ear again, was silent for a moment.

"I got a hunch," he said slowly at length. "Uh-huh, I got a notion of somethin' we will do. The wagon train will be purty certain to make camp here at the Landin' tonight. Gettin' down to where the farmers are, loadin' up and rollin' back, they won't hardly more'n make the Landin' today."

"That's reasonable," Hatfield agreed. "What about it?'

"Just this," the teamster explained. "Us fellers will unhitch and make camp with 'em. But soon as it comes dark, we'll hitch up again and skalleyhoot north as fast as we can. If them dadblamed owlhoots are figgerin' on makin' a try for the dinero, they'll hardly do it between here and where the farmers are campin' down the river.

"I figger if they make a try, it'll be after we turn off west this side of Persimmon Gap, the pass northeast through the Santiagos. The trail to Terlingua turns west just south of the Gap, in sight of it. Those robbin' jiggers will figger us to travel with the farmers' train. They'll follow the train to where we turn. If we can slide on ahead, we'll throw 'em plumb off."

Hatfield considered. "It might work, if they aren't keeping too close a watch on the train," he admitted. "Anyhow, separating from the train will remove the chance of the women and kids maybe getting hurt if a real shindig busts loose. I've noticed flyin' lead isn't at all particular where it lands."

"That's right, too," nodded the teamster. "Uh-huh, I figger it's worth tryin'."

"Your light wagon should make good time along the Comanche Trail," Hatfield remarked. "If the owlhoots don't tumble to what's up before the train reaches the Gap, you should have a start that will get you in the clear. Yes, I reckon it's worth trying. But if the sidewinders catch on, well—"

He left the sentence unfinished. The teamster looked uncomfortable, and tugged at his ear.

"You ridin' back to the camp?" he asked suddenly.

Hatfield shook his head. "No, I'm heading north. Got a chore to attend to," he replied.

The other favored him with a long look. "Okay," he said. "Got to be rollin', now. There go the other wagons. Adios."

"Hasta luego," Hatfield returned the Spanish good-by. He turned Goldy's head and rode north by west, toward the Comanche Trail. The wagoneers watched him out of sight.

"Hasta luego," the spokesman repeated thoughtfully. "That don't mean good-by, in Mexican talk. That means till we meet again!"

CHAPTER V

Outsmarted

THE sun was blazing above the western peaks when Hatfield turned into the Comanche Trail. For some moments he sat his horse and gazed southward along the ancient track that glowed like a river of blood in the lurid light.

And blood was a fitting color, he well knew. By way of the ominous track, the fierce Plains Indians had raided south from Horsehead Crossing on the Pecos River, past Comanche Springs to the Comanche Crossing on the Rio Grande. The Comanches called September "the Mexican moon," for regularly in that month they came down from their strongholds for an invasion beyond the Rio Grande.

They murdered and robbed, laid waste to a great no-man's land on both sides of the river. They burned the scant grassland to flush game until only cacti survived.

Here, too, slunk the Mescalero Apaches, the Cat People, mewing beneath the moon, with the *Andastes*, their sinister priesthood, in their grotesque masks of wolf and panther and bear, ranging right and left to scout the Trail. Here was the Dark Empire of the Tribes, over which they ruled supreme. Not until they inaugurated the presidio system, the chain of forts from Durango, Mexico, north, were the Spaniards able to hold the lands.

After the Indians came others as bad or even worse than the aborigines. Smuggler, rustler, and robber used the Comanche, and the adjacent Smuggler Trail, and still used them.

Hatfield knew that the wagon train would use the Comanche Trail north to the farming country, passing through Persimmon Gap, the pass through the Santiago chain.

But south of Persimmon Gap, the treasure wagon must turn west to reach the mines.

"And somewhere between the Comanche and Terlingua the try for the gold will be made, if it's made at all," the Lone Wolf told Goldy. "That's one gosh-awful country over there, where anything can happen. It's made to order for owl-hoots who know it. Wish I knew it better. Well, we'll play our hunch and hope for the breaks. That's all we can do."

Turning the sorrel's head, Hatfield rode northward at a good pace.

HE RODE a good part of the night before he made camp under an overhang of cliff. The morning light showed only a few miles ahead, the high notch in the towering rampart of the Santiagos through which the Comanche Trail flowed to the level lands beyond.

After throwing together a sketchy breakfast from the provisions in his saddle pouch, Hatfield rode north again, to where the trail began to climb the slopes to the notch. Here he sat his horse for a few minutes, then he turned west into a narrower track that snaked its way between steep slopes and low hills.

He followed the trail for about two miles, then abruptly turned off to the south. He sent Goldy up a slope that ended in a bench that curved around the breast of the hills. Overhanging cliffs and bristles of growth rendered a rider on the bench almost invisible from the trail below.

Hatfield found a comfortable spot and holed up in comfort.

The bench was in easy rifle range of the trail and showed indications of continuing indefinitely.

"Sort of made to order," he mused.

The sun climbed the long slant of the eastern sky. Gradually the dark shadow of the mountains retreated until the track below lay shimmering in golden light. On into the east it stretched, silent and deserted.

Hatfield began to grow acutely uneasy. It seemed to him that the treasure wagon should have put in an appearance before now. He wondered if he had slipped up. Perhaps the attempt had been made somewhere between the trail fork and Dawes Landing. But then again, perhaps the wagoneers had decided to roll with the train.

And then, when he was just about ready to regain the trail and head back south on the Comanche, he sensed movement far to the east.

A faint yellow shimmer stained the crystal-clear air beyond a distant rise. He quickly catalogued it as dust kicked up by moving hoofs.

"Looks a trifle too heavy for the wagon," he told himself. "And moving too fast, too. Now what in blazes, I wonder?"

The yellow mist boiled steadily forward. Hatfield kept his eyes glued on the crest of the distant rise. Suddenly he uttered an exclamation.

Over the rise had streamed a number of bouncing blobs with the dust mist swirling above them. Quickly he identified them as horses traveling fast. They dipped down the sag, vanished for a few minutes in the hollow below, only to reappear topping the next sag. Hatfield counted seven mounted men riding with loose rein and busy spur.

"Those jiggers, whoever they are, 'pear to be in a hustle to get somewhere," he told Goldy.

On came the hurrying riders. They swept around the base of the swell below the bench, clicked past where Hatfield

lay in concealment and vanished from sight into the west.

JIM HATFIELD did some hard and fast thinking. Swiftly he debated his course of action. The speeding horsemen might be only a bunch of cowhands heading for some spread west beyond the hills. That was perfectly possible, with the Dawes ranch and other spreads down around the river. If such was the case and he endeavoured to keep the riders in sight, he would be following a cold trail.

But he had an uneasy feeling that they could just as easily be the remainder of the bunch that attacked the steamer. If so, where were they headed for, and why? The answer was that they had seen through the teamster's ruse.

As Hatfield considered the problem, a second yellowish shimmer appeared above the distant ridge to the east. It was thinner than the first and traveled with less speed. With intense interest he watched it boil forward. His interest increased as a dark object bulged into view over crest of the rise. Quickly it resolved into moving at a good speed.

Hatfield watched the wagon roll down the sag, vanish from sight in the hollow, appear once more. A few minutes more and it rumbled past his place of concealment, careened around the bulge and out of his range of vision.

"Let's go, feller," he told Goldy as he swung into the hull. "That's the money wagon, all right, and we've got to keep it in sight."

With the sorrel going at a fast clip, he rounded a bulge of cliff and again caught sight of the speeding wagon. For a mile he kept it in view. In view, also was the trail ahead, stretching silent and deserted. Hatfield began to wonder if the riders were not, after all, just a bunch of law abiding cowhands intent on business of their own.

And then, just as he was congratulating himself that everything was well under control, a new complication developed.

The bench that flowed along the breast of the hills continued unbroken, but gradually its contours changed. For some time, the sag to the trail below had been increasing in steepness. Now it was practically a sheer cliff which neither man nor horse could climb, the bench began to slope sharply inward, like to the petal of a flower. Soon Hatfield found himself riding through a sort of lane of stone, with the trail below hidden from sight by the jut of stone that walled him in.

For a mile or more the "lane" continued, winding around the bulge of the cliffs. Hatfield increased Goldy's speed. He peered ahead, strained his ears to catch the rumble of the wagon.

Suddenly a stutter of shots sounded no great distance off. Hatfield swore as the firing continued for several moments, the cracking of six-guns punctuated by the heavier boom of rifles. Then, abruptly as it had begun, the uproar ceased. Hatfield sent Goldy charging forward. To his relief, the wall on his right was getting lower, although the cliffs on his left continued unbroken. Another moment and he jerked Goldy to a slithering halt. He swore in exasperation and glared ahead.

THE wall that blocked his view had ended. But the bench had ended also. It had sluffed down to nothingness. Directly in front was a sheer drop of a hundred feet or more.

The trail lay within half a mile of the cliff face, curving westward to vanish from sight around a bulge. Speeding over its surface was the wagon. But now men rode on each side of the vehicle.

"The sidewinders put it over!" Hatfield growled. "I sure got myself properly outsmarted this time."

He whirled Goldy and sent him racing back the way they had come. There was nothing to do but retrace his steps to a point where he could regain the trail below.

It seemed a very long time before he reached a spot where he could send the sorrel skalleyhooting down the steep slope to the level ground. Turning into the trail he rode at top speed, glancing upward at the walled bench from time to time. Where the ledge sluffed off against the cliff was a bulge. He rounded it and jerked Goldy to a dust plowing halt.

In the trail directly ahead lay three bodies. A quick glance identified them as the wagoneers with whom he had talked the day before. They had been shot to death.

Hatfield wasted no time examining the bodies. Face bleak, he rode on. He covered

a mile and slackened speed. He knew he could easily overtake the slower traveling wagon. But the odds were too heavy to permit a direct attack on the owlhoots. He gauged his pace to hold the distance between him and the vehicle. The broad tire marks in the dust were sufficient guide for the moment. The wagon could not turn off the trail without leaving evidence of the move.

For an hour he rode steadily, seeing nothing, hearing nothing. He reached the beginning of a long slope up which the trail writhed over broken ground. The crest stood out hard and clear against the sun drenched skyline. It still wanted a good five hours until sunset.

Hatfield negotiated the slope at reduced speed. Just below the crest, he pulled up and dismounted. Leaving Goldy standing, he covered the remaining distance on foot. As he neared the lip of the sag, he left the trail and took advantage of all possible cover. Finally he reached a point where he could see over the crest.

The slope on the far side was even longer than the one he had just surmounted. The trail dropped steeply down it in a series of curves. And far ahead, approaching a bulge of cliff was the wagon and its escort. Hatfield counted four riders and two led horses.

"The poor devils back there gave a good account of themselves," he muttered with satisfaction. "One jigger driving the team, and two bodies, or badly wounded men, tucked in the wagon. Five to one, as she now stands. Well, that isn't so bad. Now my chore is to keep out of sight till dark. Then we'll see how things size up."

He returned to his horse, mounted and rode boldly over the crest.

DURING the following hours, Hatfield twice spotted the wagon. He was confident that he himself had not been observed. Doubtless the robbers expected no pursuit and gave little attention to the terrain behind. When the shadows began crawling up the western slopes, Hatfield increased Goldy's pace until he had halved the distance between him and his quarry. As the blue dusk sifted down from the hilltops, he shortened the separating space still more. Finally he decided he was less than half a mile behind the wagon. Another hour, with full darkness arrived, and he felt that he had halved that. On the crest of a rise he pulled up and sat listening.

From the darkness below came a whisper of sound which he catalogued as the grind of tires over the stones. Abruptly the sound ceased. Which meant, he reasoned, that the owlhoots had either pulled off the trail or were preparing to make camp for the night.

After a moment of hesitation, he sent Goldy drifting down the sag at a slow walk.

He had covered but a few hundred yards when he again pulled the sorrel to a halt and sat tense and listening.

Only a short distance ahead sounded the clicking of horses' irons. Hatfield's grip tightened on the bridle, preparatory to swerving the sorrel off the trail. But almost instantly he relaxed. The hoofbeats were drawing away.

"Three or four horses," he muttered. "Now what?"

Swiftly the sound died in the distance. Hatfield checked himself. And then, less than two hundred yards distant and a little to the left, a glow appeared in the darkness. It quickly increased in intensity. A reddish flicker stained the crests of the brush ahead.

"Made camp for the night—lit a fire!" the Lone Wolf exulted. "And unless I'm a heap mistook, about three of the sidewinders rode on ahead for some reason or other. Maybe to notify the rest of the bunch of what happened. Perhaps to arrange for making off with the gold in the wagon. They'd hardly take the wagon much farther, and that much metal is too much weight to pack off on horseback. Chances are they sent for pack mules to handle it. This may work out all to the good."

He dismounted and led Goldy off the trail, concealing him in a clump of thicket. Then he regained the track and stole forward in the shadow of the growth to the left.

The light of the fire grew stronger. Another moment and he could hear gruff voices conversing, and a rattle as of pots and pans being moved around. Doubtless the wagon contained cooking utensils and provisions.

With the utmost caution he stole on. Behind a final fringe of brush he paused

and stared at the scene only a few yards distant.

The wagon had been drawn off the trail and stood beside a trickle of water seeping from under a huge boulder. Close by burned the fire. Two men were moving about the blaze. Their horses and the wagon horses, all hobbled, were grazing on the bank of the little stream.

For some minutes Hatfield watched and listened. Finally he became convinced that the two men beside the fire were all of the outlaw band that had remained behind with the wagon. The two riderless horses he had noted before were also missing.

Swiftly he made his plans. He edged to the left still more, paused and drew his guns. He stepped boldly from concealment. His voice rang out.

"Elevate!"

The two owlhoots whirled, with startled exclamations. They stared unbelievingly at the tall figure walking slowly toward them. Then, yelling an oath, one went for his gun.

Hatfield shot him, dead center. He went down, kicking and clawing. His companion dived sideways away from the fire. Hatfield shot, and missed. The owlhoot's gun blazed. A slug burned a red streak along Hatfield's cheek. The outlaw was in the shadow, his form an indistinct blur.

A lance of flame split the shadows as he fired at the Ranger, who was racing toward him, weaving and ducking. The slug fanned Hatfield's face. Then both his Colts bucked and roared in his hands. He saw the shadowy form reel sideways, and fired again.

The thud of the falling body came to his ears. He leaped beyond the ring of firelight and crouched.

But the sprawled form in the shadows did not move. Hatfield glided forward, guns ready. Then he lowered the Colts, ejected the spent shells and replaced them with fresh cartridges. The owlhoot was dead.

Standing in the darkness, Hatfield eyed the wagon. No sound came from the gloom under its top. He felt fairly convinced that it was unoccupied by any living thing. But it would not do, he knew very well, to take chances. Even a desperately wounded member of the breed was as dangerous as a broken-back rattler. Finally he took a chance, plucked a brand from the fire and thrust it under the cover. Nobody, dead or living, was in sight.

Throwing the torch aside, Hatfield returned to the dead men beside the fire. They were ornery looking specimens, typical Border scum. With swift efficiency he examined the bodies. Looped around the neck of each was a flaming red handkerchief.

The neckerchiefs were carefully folded to conceal eye holes cut in them. A twitch upward and they could provide masks—the red masks of the notorious Scarlet Riders, or of imitators of the band.

"I'm beginning to get a notion these sidewinders are really members of the bunch after all," he muttered as he went through the pockets of the dead men.

Of the miscellany of odds and ends he discovered, only one thing interested Hatfield. It was a nickel badge with the legend, "Deputy Sheriff" cut in its surface.

"Wonder where he stole that?" the Ranger growled, pocketing the badge.

FURTHER search uncovered nothing of significance. He investigated the wagon and found the sacks of gold pieces stored in a corner. From the number and weight of the sacks, he judged that none of the gold had been removed. Climbing out of the wagon, he pondered the situation.

It was logical to believe that the three owlhoots he heard depart from the camp site would return, perhaps shortly. Doubtless they would bring others with them. To drive the wagon west along the trail would be to run the chance of encountering them. Which Hatfield had not the least desire to do.

But no matter where he took the vehicle, the tire marks would plainly reveal the course. To remove the gold and conceal it would take a long time. And time, he feared, was something of which he did not have much. He resolved on a desperate expedient.

Working at top speed, he loaded the bodies of the dead owlhoots into the wagon. Their horses he tethered to the end gate. He harnessed the horses and let them stand while he removed all evidence of the fight in the clearing. Then he climbed to the seat, turned the wagon into the trail and headed east.

As he passed the thicket where Goldy was concealed, he whistled for the sorrel, who came trotting to the trail and took up a position behind the wagon. Hatfield knew he would follow without question.

"And now," he reasoned, "everything depends on two things; first, that the farmers' wagon train made it through the Gap yesterday; second, that I get to the trail forks south of the gap before those sidewinders catch up with me. If the farmers passed there yesterday, the trail will be so cut up with wheel tracks that nobody will be able to tell whether his wagon passed that way.

"I'm playing a hunch that when the owlhoot bunch get back to the clearing where the camp was made and don't find the wagon or the two jiggers they left to guard it, they'll figure those two gents decided to do a little double-crossing on their own account and hightailed with the gold. Where would they go with it? To Dawes Landing and across to Mexico. That's what I hope the bunch will figure. Now if I can just make the trail forks in time!"

Getting the best possible speed out of the tired horses, he sent the wagon rolling eastward. On the crest of each rise, he glanced back over his shoulder. Each time the trail lay deserted in the moonlight with the marks of the broad tires clear upon it.

Dawn was streaking the sky when Hatfield reached the trail forks. He halted the team, leaped down and examined the surface of the Comanche Trail. To his infinite relief, it was cut and scored by a multitude of wheel tracks. The farmers had already passed through the Gap.

HATFIELD turned the wagon into the Comanche and headed south. He drove for a short distance, carefully scanning the ground to the right of the trail. The strengthening light showed it stony and brush grown. Finally he reached a spot suitable for his purpose. He swerved the wagon from the trail and sent it lurching and bumping over the stony ground. Behind a thicket a hundred yards or so west of the trail, he pulled up. He slid down from the seat and retraced his steps to the trail.

Very little evidence of his leaving the trail was apparent. He broke a leafy branch from the chaparral and with the greatest care smoothed over the tracks left by the veering wagon. He replaced a few overturned boulders, made sure that no broken twigs dangled. Then he hurried to the wagon and urged the horses westward through the scattered growth.

The nearest hill slope was fully a quarter of a mile from the trail. Here, with the wagon concealed behind tall brush, Hatfield pulled up. He tied the team and mounted the slope until he had a clear view of the forks. He rolled a cigarette and settled himself comfortably to wait.

His wait was not long. Less than an hour had passed before a group of speeding horsemen bulged into view from the west. Hatfield counted fourteen altogether. The distance was too great for him to distinguish features, but he noted that a man riding slightly in advance of the others, evidently the leader, was very tall, with broad shoulders.

At the forks the riders pulled up. The tall leader slid from his hull and paced back and forth across the Comanche. Hatfield saw him point to the ground. The others leaned in their saddles and gazed downward. What appeared to be a fierce discussion followed.

Hatfield crouched low in the brush, every nerve strung to hair-trigger alertness. Another moment would doubtless decide his fate. He felt his palms sweating at the thought that perhaps one of the concealed horses would pick the time to do a little neighing. The sound would carry to the group in the trail.

The tall leader turned and gazed earnestly toward the high notch of the Gap cutting the Santiagos. Then he faced about and swept the terrain to the west with his gaze. Hatfield's jaw set hard. He tightened his grip on his rifle.

But suddenly the leader strode to his horse and mounted. Evidently he voiced a word of command, for the troop headed south at a fast pace.

Hatfield relaxed, with a sigh of relief. He chuckled as he watched the group stream over a distant rise and out of sight.

"Headed for the Landing," he told himself. "And I've a notion it'll take 'em a little time to make sure the wagon never showed up there. Then, if my hunch is still straight, they'll hightail back to Persimmon Gap. They'll figure their pards turned north on the Comanche, aiming to

make a getaway into the Pecos country, maybe.

"At least I hope they'll figure that way. If they don't, and decide to head west again, I may have an interesting time of it before I make Terlingua. Must be nigh onto fifty miles, and the horses are tired. I'll turn 'em loose to graze for an hour and then light out."

CHAPTER VI

"Loaded" Fence

THE most astounded man in Texas was the manager of the Terlingua Mines when the treasure wagon pulled up in front of his office the following morning. The equipage was powdered with dust, the axles hot. The horses were on the verge of exhaustion. Hatfield's face was lined and haggard, his eyes red from lack of sleep. But he was in a decidedly complacent mood.

"What—how—why—" the manager stuttered.

"Suppose you check the contents of those pokes first," Hatfield suggested. "Then we can talk. And right away, I want the horses cared for. They need it."

"We'll put them in the company barn immediately," the manager replied. "I suppose that big sorrel is yours? Where are the riders of the other two?"

"You'll find 'em in the wagon alongside the dinero," Hatfield replied laconically. "Reckon they won't need horses any more."

The manager gulped and stared, but decided against asking further questions. Instead he began to bellow orders. He directed a clerk to guide Hatfield to the nearby company eating house, set other employees to work packing the gold sacks into the office.

After a good wash-up and a satisfying meal, Hatfield returned to the mine office.

"Not a dollar missing," the manager replied to his question. "And now, will you please talk a little. I never had a more bewildering thing happen to me in my life. What happened? Where are the men we sent with the wagon? Who are those dead men, and who killed them?"

In terse sentences, Hatfield told his story. The manager said things that smelt of sulphur. He gripped Hatfield's hand hard.

"No use trying to thank you for what you did," he said. "I've a notion the directors will find a better way to express their appreciation. You say the bodies of our men are down there on the Comanche Trail?"

"Unless the farmers picked them up and packed them along with them," Hatfield replied. "The chances are they did. They would have recognized them as the driver and guards of the wagon, of course."

"I'll have the sheriff, over at Marton, notified right away," the manager promised.

"Sheriff's name is Snyder, isn't it?" Hatfield commented.

"Not any more," the manager replied. "Sheriff Snyder was defeated for re-election. A man named Fulton, Craig Fulton, got in last election. He owns a saloon in Marton, I believe. Seems to be all right, though. Hadn't held office a week before he recovered a stolen herd of cattle and killed two of the rustlers.

"I understand he routed a bunch of Mexican bandits and did for several of them a little later. I've a notion he may give the Scarlet Riders trouble before he's through with them. John Snyder was a good officer, but he was old. To my way of thinking, he spent too much time backing up Gordon Wagner in his feud against the farmers. Wagner is the biggest ranch owner in the county.

HATFIELD received this bit of news without comment. He recalled, however, that Captain McDowell had spoken favorably of Sheriff John Snyder.

"You say they're having a cowmen-granger row over there?" he asked.

"That's right," the manager replied. "And I understand it is getting worse. There has been considerable wire cutting and destruction of crops lately, I heard. And Gordon Wagner had a big barn burned and a waterhole poisoned."

Hatfield looked serious. This was an unlooked for complication.

"The sort of a row that plays right into the hands of the owlhoots," he told himself. Aloud he said, "Reckon I'd better ride to Marton and report to the sheriff.

He'll want a first-hand account of what happened."

"Yes, that would be wise," the manager agreed. "I'll give you a letter to him. Do you figure to stay in this section for a while?"

"Maybe, if I can tie onto a job of riding," Hatfield replied.

"No trouble about that," the manager replied. "I'll give you a letter to Gordon Wagner, too. Wagner is one of our stockholders. He'll appreciate what you did. Saves him considerable money."

"Why did you have all that dinero sent over here?" Hatfield asked.

"To meet payrolls and pay for holdings to the south in which we are interested," the manager explained.

"Looks like it would be safer to handle such transactions by check," Hatfield commented.

The manager shrugged. "No argument there," he replied, "but folks over here don't like paper. They want cash money—hard money. It means trouble and risk for us, but what can we do? The agreements drawn up by Judge Price, over at Marton, specify payment in cash."

Hatfield nodded. He understood the situation. Not even the big cattlemen liked paper. Buyers went well heeled with ready money. Which all too often worked to the advantage of gentlemen with loose notions relative to other folks' belongings.

"What I can't understand," said the manager, "is how those robbers learned the gold shipment was being made by boat."

"The presence of your mine wagon with the farmer's train was something of an advertisement," Hatfield suggested.

"I would agree with you, except that the wagon left here in the dead of night and did not join with the train until it reached the trail forks south of Persimmon Gap," replied the manager.

"That point is less than a day's journey to Dawes Landing. Which would mean that the robbers saw our wagon join with the train there and deduced its purpose. That hardly seems reasonable. Why would the Scarlet Riders—I have no doubt but it was them—be down there in a section certainly not favorable to the depredations in which they indulge?"

Hatfield nodded again. He recalled the cribbing built into the river, by which the level of the channel had been lowered. That chore had taken time.

"Yes, it begins to look like there was a leak somewhere," he admitted.

"It certainly does," the manager agreed emphatically. "I can't understand it."

HATFIELD slept the clock around and felt fit for anything once more. After another talk with the manager, he rode north-by-east in the shadow of the Christmas Mountains, Corazones Peaks, Red Bluff and the Nine Point Mesa. The bodies of the slain owlhoots had been dispatched to Marton the day before for inspection by the coroner and on the chance that somebody might identify them.

In his pocket, Hatfield carried a letter addressed to Craig Fulton, sheriff of the county. A second letter introduced him to Gordon Wagner, owner of the Running W spread, and set out in most complimentary terms the part he played in recovering the stolen Terlingua Mines gold.

With the sun low in the west, Hatfield rounded the northern tip of the Santiagos. On his left towered Elephant Mountain of the Del Nortes. Ahead was the pass between the two ranges, with Marton nearly twenty miles beyond. From a high bench he gazed eastward across the Toboso Flats, so named because of the prevalence of buffalo or toboso grass. In the dying sunlight, the flats appeared to be a broad expanse of water.

The evening was peculiarly clear and bright. Far to the east, Hatfield could just make out the forms of ranchhouses and their outlying buildings. Tiny dots, he knew, were cattle feeding on the rich grass.

Directly below was something that interested him still more. Squares and rectangles of vivid green lay in the shadow of the mountain range. These were growing crops. Far buildings could also be seen, looking like a child's doll houses.

The scene was peaceful, and beautiful. Hatfield shook his head as he gazed upon it.

"Looks like folks with such a nice country to live in could get along with each other," he thought. "Doesn't make sense that they should waste time making trouble for one another. All right, feller, let's go. It'll be late before we make that darn town, and right now I'm ready for

a surrounding of chuck. I can't fill up on grass like you did a ways back."

The trail, or what passed for one, wound down the long slope over a series of benches. Long before Hatfield reached the level ground below, full dark had descended. Goldy was forced to pick his way carefully and over the boulders and depressions. A gibbous moon poured its light from a clear sky, but overhanging growth cast deceptive shadows across the track. As a consequence, the going was very slow.

On the lip of a broad bench some five hundred feet above the level ground, Hatfield pulled Goldy to a halt. Below, the landscape was spread before his eyes like a map, softened and silvered in the moonlight. The slope the trail traversed jutted outward, a long tongue of broken land. To left and right, the farm lands were clearly outlined. Beyond was level prairie. Hatfield could make out the moving blotches of many cattle.

SUDDENLY he made out something else. Three horsemen were riding the trail from the east. As the Ranger watched them curiously, they branched off to the south, riding parallel to the wire that enclosed the farm lands. Within plain view of where Hatfield sat his horse they pulled up in a huddle. Then they separated and rode along parallel to the wire, and some distance apart. In the deceptive moonlight, Hatfield could not be sure of their movements.

"Darned if it doesn't look like they're building and twirling loops," he mused. "What in blazes is there to rope down there? I can't see a thing."

A moment later he was sure one of the riders made a cast, although of course the rope was invisible at that distance.

The rope appeared to have tied onto something. His pony backed slowly away, apparently straining hard. Hatfield shook his head in bewilderment.

A second rider went through a similar maneuver. The third followed suit. And abruptly Hatfield understood. They were roping fence posts and pulling them down!

Hatfield debated his own move. He could not hope to ride down the moonlit trail without being seen or heard. The post pullers were likely to resent interruption, and to show their resentment by throwing hot lead.

And while fence breaking was a law violation, Hatfield did not consider it serious enough to warrant a killing. Such shenanigans were sometimes indulged in by hot-headed young punchers with little of real harm in them. He estimated the distance with his eye, slid his Winchester from the saddle boot.

"It's pretty long range, but I'll see if I can't throw a mite of a scare into those gents," he decided, raising the rifle. "I figure I can drop a slug close enough for them to hear it. They—hell and hoptoads!"

From the prairie below fluffed a blaze of reddish light and a cloud of smoke. The air rocked to the roar of an explosion.

HATFIELD saw the horse nearest the wire go off its feet as if hit by a sledgehammer. The other two, reared and danced, whirled and streaked across the prairie. Hatfield could almost hear their terrified snorts and the yells of their riders.

The first horse rolled and kicked, scrambled to its feet. Its rider staggered erect and made a frantic grab for the saddlehorn. Running and leaping beside the fleeing cayuse, he managed to haul himself onto its back. A moment later he vanished from sight around a clump of thicket, the shadow of which had already swallowed his companions.

Hatfield lowered his rifle, and whistled in amazement. As the smoke cloud dissipated, the could see that a great hole had been blown in the ground.

"Dynamite!" he exclaimed. "But how in blazes was it set off? Well, one thing is sure for certain. Wire cutting in this section is liable to be sort of unhealthy."

His face was bleak as he regarded the ominous crater looming darkly in the moonlight. The farmers undoubtedly had cause for resentment, but such retaliation, Hatfield felt, was carrying things a mite far. If the wire cutters had been using nippers on the fence, instead of being at the end of sixty-foot ropes, they would have been blown to bits.

Hatfield gathered up his reins and spoke to Goldy. The sorrel began picking his way down the trail. Before they were half way to the level ground, Hatfield saw lights bobbing up from the south. Figures on foot showed in the moonlight, following

the line of the fence. They grouped around the gaping hole.

Without changing pace, Hatfield continued to ride down the trail. The men with the lanterns, he felt sure, were farmers attracted by the explosion. He knew they could not fail to see him riding toward them, but he rode on regardless. He reached the level ground and turned Goldy's head toward the silent group. He was within a score of yards of the farmers when a voice ordered him to halt.

"That'll be about far enough, cowboy," said a grizzled, lanky man, stepping forward. "What's been goin' on here?"

Hatfield pulled Goldy to a halt.

"Reckon that's a question you can answer better than I can," he replied quietly.

The farmer moved nearer. He seemed puzzled at the Lone Wolf's remark.

"How's that?" he asked.

"Don't you figure it's a mite high-handed, planting dynamite under fence posts?" Hatfield asked as the other, ready rifle in hand, paused a few feet from his stirrup.

The farmer stared at him. "What in tarnation are you talkin' about, anyhow?" he asked. His companions moved forward to join him.

Hatfield returned the other's gaze. He speculated about the old man with interest. The farmer's bewilderment seemed genuine enough.

"Did you see what happened here?" he asked. "Us fellers heard a big blow and come to see what more hell raisin' them dadblamed ranchers were up to."

In a few quiet words, Hatfield reported what he had witnessed. The farmer tugged his beard, shook his gray head.

"Son," he said, "this is my land and my fence. I didn't plant no dynamite on it."

THERE was an undeniable ring of truth in the statement. Hatfield was well enough acquainted with the type the old man represented to know that lying would not be one of his accomplishments.

"Well, somebody did," he replied. "It sure went off when one of those posts got yanked over. Let's look around a mite and see if we can learn how it was set off. Those three jiggers were mighty lucky to be as far away from it as they were. I reckon one of 'em got pretty badly shook up as it was."

He dismounted and joined the farmers, who eyed him somewhat askance but offered no objection as he led the way to the crater the dynamite hollowed out.

"Bring the lanterns, and let's go over the ground carefully," Hatfield suggested.

The farmers, without understanding just why, found themselves obeying the order given in a voice that proclaimed authority.

Hatfield took one of the lanterns and clambered into the crater. The ground was still rank with powder fumes, but he discovered nothing of significance. He climbed out again and began searching the ground around the ragged lip. Suddenly he stopped and plucked something from a clump of grass.

The farmers clustered around him, gazing at the object. It was a single-barreled shotgun—or, rather the remains of one. The stock was shattered, the lock smashed. A short length of barrel ended raggedly, as if the muzzle had been forcibly

[Turn page]

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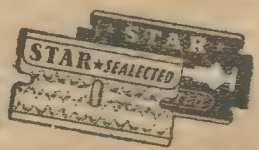

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wrenched away. From the trigger dangled a bit of fine wire.

"This is what they fired the charge with," Hatfield said, with conviction. "Wonder how they did it?"

He gazed around. His glance centered on the tangle of broken wire and splintered posts that lay nearby. Handing the shotgun to one of the farmers, he inspected the smashed fence. Suddenly he uttered an exclamation of satisfaction and pointed to the end of one of the posts. The timber had been cleanly cut through with a saw. A length of thin wire was stapled to one side.

"See how it worked?" Hatfield asked the farmers. "Only the stands of barbed wire held this sawn post erect. If the wires were nipped, the post would fall, dragging on this thin wire that evidently ran into the ground to the trigger of the buried shotgun, which was cocked. The wire pulled the trigger and fired the gun. The dynamite was set to receive the charge of shot from the gun. That set it off. Simple, and plumb devilish.

A dead silence followed the explanation. It was broken by the suspicious voice of one of the farmers.

"Feller, you sure seem to know a heap about it."

Hatfield smiled a little. Then he remarked, in casual tones, "Did the folks from Del Rio arrive okay?"

Again there was silence, then another question, more charged with suspicion than the former.

"What do you know about them folks?"

"I rode on the boat with them, from Del Rio," Hatfield replied.

This time the silence was broken by the grizzled spokesman of the farmers.

"By gosh!" he exclaimed excitedly, "you must be the big feller they told us about, the feller who kept the engines goin' till they got off the burnin' boat! Be your name Hatfield?"

THE Lone Wolf smiled. "So I been told, ever since I can remember," he replied.

The farmer stuck out a horny hand.

"Put 'er there, Hatfield!" he said. "I'm plumb pleased to meet up with you, and I reckon the rest of the boys are, too. My name's Brady, Moses Brady. Put 'er there!"

Hatfield "put 'er there!" He also shook hands with the others, and acknowledged the names rattled off by Moses Brady.

"Where you headed for, son?" Brady asked.

"Marton," Hatfield told him.

"It's nigh onto fifteen miles, and it's late," Brady said. "I'd take it kind if you'd spend the night at my place, down the road. What you say?"

"Reckon I could do a heap worse," Hatfield admitted.

"Fine!" Brady said. "There's a good helpin' of home cooked vittles waitin', and a comfortable bed. But first we'll fix up this gap in the fence or them cow critters over there will be wanderin' in and trompin' my crops. Not that they'd do over much damage to the stand of corn up here, I reckon. Them fellers were plumb hare brained to cut the fence up here."

While staples and wire were being procured, Hatfield examined the smashed fence more exhaustively. Nosed to one of the poles he discovered about thirty feet of well suppled manila rope.

"No wonder that one jigger's horse turned a flip-flop," he remarked to Brady. "He was tied hard and fast, and when his cayuse tried to go away from here, the rope threw him before it broke. Wonder he hadn't busted his neck."

He looped the broken rope and tied it on his saddle pouch,

"Souvenir," he explained to Brady.

The farmers quickly repaired the fence. They shoveled earth into the hole beneath the wire.

"That'll hold 'em," said Brady, straightening his back. "And I've a notion there won't be any more shindigs tonight, not after the racket that dynamite kicked up. Come on, son, let's go eat."

As they walked to Brady's farm house, which was about a quarter of a mile to the south, Hatfield asked a question.

"How come you fellers got here in such a hurry."

"We were guardin' the wheat stands just to the south of here," Brady explained. "That's where those rapscallions can do some real damage, if they're smart. What we're scairt of more than anything else, at this time of the year, is fire. Start a fire in the wheat and it would sweep the fields in no time. So far, they haven't

thought of that. Just cut the wire and let the stock in to eat the crops and tromp 'em."

HATFIELD nodded. "Funny thing, don't you think," he remarked, "that those three jiggers should go to work on the wire right where that dynamite was planted? I don't reckon there's more of those bombs strung along under posts."

"It's beyond me," Brady replied. "I sure didn't plant that charge, and I'd be ready to swear none of our boys did. If anybody had had such a notion, they would have planted it around the wheat or alfalfa, not beside a crop of sweet corn."

Hatfield nodded again. "And," he added thoughtfully, "if you are right and those three fellers were cowhands from one of the spreads around here, there would have been some hard feelings if they'd got blown to pieces by the charge."

Brady allowed that was correct.

"That's the kind of thing that starts a real shooting range war," Hatfield continued. "Nobody's been killed hereabouts as yet, have they?"

"Not yet," Brady admitted, "but some of the boys workin' in the fields have heard lead whistle."

"Shooting to scare is one thing, although it's risky business, but shooting to kill is another," Hatfield said.

Brady helped Hatfield put up his horse; then they repaired to the small but tightly built farmhouse.

Mrs. Brady, a motherly, gray-haired woman, greeted Hatfield in friendly fashion and bustled about preparing a meal.

"He reminds me of our Caleb," she said, smiling at her husband. "Caleb is our son who's over east studying to be a doctor," she added for Hatfield's information. "Yes, Mose, he has the same look about the eyes and the same black hair."

"Uh-huh," agreed the farmer, "but he's bigger'n Caleb. Caleb is a six-footer, but this young feller is a heap taller than that."

As they sat smoking and waiting for the food to cook, Hatfield adroitly drew out the farmer about conditions in the section.

"This snappin' and snarlin' between the farmers and the cattlemen has been goin' on for a long time," Brady said. "We thought when we elected Bascomb Price judge and Craig Fulton sheriff, that things would get better. Instead, they've got worse. Gordon Wagner was mighty put out when his candidates lost the election. Reckon he's thinkin' a mite better about Fulton now, but he still blames us fellers for his men losin'."

"Wagner is a sort of big skookum hewolf in this section, eh?" Hatfield remarked.

BRADY replied, "Uh-huh. He ran things for so long he got the notion anything he did was right, I reckon," Brady replied. "I've a notion he ain't such a bad feller, down to the bottom, but he's sure uppity. All the other big ranchers foller his lead, too. That is except young Val Carver, who owns the Cross C ranch, and Webb Kenton of the Tumblin' K.

"Carver has always been friendly with us fellers. He sells us meat, and he's bucked Gordon Wagner more than once over the way he carries on. They had a purty serious row just last week. Got into an argufyin' in town. Wagner knocked Carver down—he's a big, husky feller. Carver reached for his gun, but Wagner shot first and knocked a hunk of meat out of Carver's arm. Judge Price bound 'em both over to keep the peace, but I've a notion it ain't finished yet."

Hatfield nodded, his eyes serious. Undoubtedly, real trouble was building up in the section. For the moment he forgot all about the Scarlet Riders and their depredations. His experience was that an owlhoot bunch was easier to deal with than a range war.

"What about the other feller, Kenton?" he asked.

"Oh, Kenton is all right," Brady replied. "He's a funny feller in some ways. 'Tends strictly to his own business. Says he's got enough trouble makin' a livin' without mixin' in other folks' rows. He's friendly enough to us fellers, and he gets along with the other cattlemen, too—even with Gordon Wagner, though I figger Wagner holds a mite of a grudge against him."

"How's that?" Hatfield asked as he rolled a cigarette with the slim fingers of his left hand.

The farmer chuckled. "Kenton plumb outsmarted Wagner in a deal," he explained.

"Webb Kenton showed up in this section a couple of years back. 'Peared to

have considerable money and nothin' much to do. He rode around, lookin' the country over, makin' friends with folks and learnin' about the cattle business here. One day he rode to Gordon Wagner's place and made him an offer for his holdin's down to the south of here. Wagner jumped at the chance to sell, and figgered he'd sure put over a smart deal."

Brady chuckled, and stuffed tobacco into his pipe. He blew out a cloud of smoke, and resumed.

"But it was Kenton who was plumb smart. This is a funny country, this southwest Texas country. Everything is topsy-turvy. Over to the east of here is Terloga Crik—just t'other side that line of trees you can see from the front door. Up to the north a ways, Terloga Crik runs over our land. It's a big crik and never goes dry. It gives us plenty of water for our irrigation.

"Just above where you rode down the trail, the crik turns east a mite and runs on south over Gordon Wagner's land. Wagner's land is good land with springs and waterholes on it and another crik over to the east. But ten miles to the south, below our holdin's is a big high ridge that runs across this valley from east to west. When Terloga Crik butts up against that ridge, it turns west and follers the ridge to the hills over to the west. When it hits the hills, it scoots under a cliff and never shows up again, so far as anybody knows. That is it never used to show up."

BRADY paused to light his pipe again. Hatfield maintained an interested silence. He began to divine what was coming.

"Well," resumed Brady, "down south of that big ridge is the land Wagner sold Kenton. It's nice level land with good grass growin' on it, and thickets and trees. But it didn't have a drop of water on it for cattle to drink. Wagner never run any cows down there, and because the land seemed plumb worthless for cattle raisin', of course he was glad to sell."

"And figured Kenton for a plumb sucker," Hatfield interpolated.

"That's right," Brady nodded. "But Kenton sure wasn't no sucker. Down south of the ridge, the base of the west hills is a long line of cliffs, big tall ones of limestone. Well, Kenton noticed something down there that everybody else had overlooked.

"About twenty feet above the ground—the land level is lower south of the ridge than it is to the north—them cliffs were all growed over with ferns and lichens and such truck. Kenton went up the cliff where the ferns was growin' thickest. He planted some big dynamite charges and set 'em off."

Brady paused again, his faded blue eyes twinkling.

"Go on," Hatfield urged.

"The dynamite blew a big hole in the cliff," Brady continued his story. "And I'll be gosh-darned if a great big stream of water didn't come tumblin' out of that hole. What do yuh know about that!"

"Terloga Creek, running underground, of course," Hatfield said. "That's not uncommon in a limestone region. The Big Bend country, and over east for a long ways, has one of the most intensive underground water systems in the world. As the Rocky Mountain chain rose, millions of years ago, bringing the mountains of Western Texas with it, the crust of the earth was tremendously faulted.

"The fault zone in Texas is easily identifiable from Del Rio to San Antonio, for example. Ground water made caverns and stored supplies for future artesian wells, and so on. Ground water came from the faulting and originated rivers like the San Antonio, the San Marcos and the Guadalupe. In the long run the underground water supplies will prove to be among Texas' most valued resources.

"It will eventually make garden spots out of what is now desert land. As you fellers doubtless know, the enormous flow from the springs around Del Rio are responsible for the agricultural prosperity over there."

"Son, you talk like a college feller, or like Webb Kenton when he gets goin' good," old Brady said admiringly. "I don't understand much what you're sayin', but I reckon it's right. Anyhow, Kenton sure got plenty of water. He directed the flow, dug ditches and waterholes and sort of turned what you might call desert land into one of them garden spots, I reckon. He brought in some cattle—not over many, but good ones. He's been bringin' in more of late, and I reckon he's doin' purty well."

"A fellow like him usually does," Hatfield agreed. "And you say Wagner didn't like it?"

"Oh, I reckon it wasn't unnatural for him not to like it over well," Brady replied. "He never said much and he stayed friendly to Kenton, on the outside, anyhow. But I've heered he kicks himself around his barn every time he thinks about it."

Hatfield chuckled, and sat down to table at Mrs. Brady's call.

CHAPTER VII

When Thieves Fall Out

WHILE Hatfield slept peacefully under Moses Brady's hospitable roof, there was a wrathful meeting in Bascomb Price's law office in Marton. Webb Kenton was there, his blue eyes so dark with anger that they looked black. There also were Sheriff Craig Fulton and Deputy Chuck Davis, the former bartender.

"It was the worst bungled job I ever heard of," Price declared furiously. "Ninety thousand dollars as good as ours, and we lose it. Kenton, why do you always think you know better than anybody else? Why do you always insist on doing things the hard and complicated way just to show how smart you are?

"Right from the beginning I didn't favor that attack on the steamer. If you'd laid low, like I advised, and swooped down on the wagon, everything would have been okay. But no. You had to figure out a fool plan with fancy angles, botch it and give the whole thing away."

"That try for the steamer was all to the good except for one thing," Kenton defended himself. "I figured things out just right, laid my plans accordingly and wrecked the boat. But how was I to know they'd have a chain-lightnin' two-gunman on that infernal boat. If it hadn't been for him, we wouldn't have had any trouble. The farmers weren't, and we would have handled the crew easy. That so-and-so, whoever he was, threw the boys plumb off balance.

"Then the boat slewed out into the middle of the river and went down it burnin' up. There was nothing we could do then. From all indications, that gold was headed for the bottom of the Rio Grande. I was already figurin' a way to get it up again. But somehow they got the boat to the shore and unloaded it. I kept close tabs on them, saw the wagon leave the Landin' after dark and shot on ahead with the boys. Everything worked out perfect."

"Except for half a dozen good men dying," Price growled. "The one smart thing you did, Kenton, was to pack those two bodies off with you when you went to fetch the mules. Suppose they had arrived here with those other two? That would have started something that would have meant the finish for all of us."

"What I want to know," growled Sheriff Fulton "is who is that blasted cowhand who did for the boys and grabbed the wagon?"

"And what I want to know, is how did he do it?" stormed Kenton. "I'm still up in the air about that."

"The note from the mines manager didn't say," replied Fulton. "I reckon mebbe we'll learn when he shows up here. That is if he shows up. He may decide it's the healthy thing for him to trail his rope out of this section."

"It's goin' to be unhealthy for him, all right," Kenton declared vindictively. "I'm out to even the score with him, personally. What are you goin' to do if he shows up, Fulton?"

"What can I do but shake hands with him and tell him what a fine chore he did?" snorted the sheriff. "Sometimes, Webb, you talk like a plumb damn fool!"

"That'll be about enough of that from you!" Kenton replied, his eyes narrowing to slits.

"Here! here! Stop it!" interrupted Price. "We've got enough on our hands without starting a ruckus among ourselves. I tell you, I'm worried. That fellow doesn't sound like any ordinary chuckline riding cowhand to me. Did anybody get a look at him?"

"I sort of glimpsed him from the riverbank," Kenton replied. "He looked about seven feet tall and broad as a barn door. But the light wasn't over good, and after he put a rifle slug through my hat, I moved back a mite."

Price looked as if he sort of wished the

slug had been a little lower, but he refrained from putting his thought into words.

"Well," he said, "he should show up here tomorrow, if he shows up at all. I think everybody should be hanging around for a look at him."

"I'll be here," Kenton promised grimly.

"And you'd better appoint another deputy, Fulton," Price added. "By the way, what are you giving out about Bob Raines?"

"Oh, Raines resigned three days ago and left for southern Arizona," Fulton replied. "I'm passin' the word around."

"Southern Arizona is sort of hot," Price remarked dryly.

The remark, which was apparently intended to be humorous, was not well received by his hearers, who glowered instead of smiling.

AFTER a hearty breakfast, Hatfield said goodby to the farmer and his wife and headed for town. As he rode across the rolling rangeland, he was more and more impressed by the evident prosperity of the section. The cows were fat and numerous, the buildings he saw were all in good repair. He noted nearly a dozen different brands in the course of his ride. Most numerous were the Running W's. Evidently Gordon Wagner was a man bountifully endowed with this world's goods. Hatfield wondered just what sort of a person he was.

He did not judge Wagner from his attitude of intolerance toward the farmers and barbed wire. That attitude had been built up in the course of the years, and was shared, he well knew, by nearly all the old-time cowmen.

He knew, too, that such men as Wagner would be forced to change their attitude. Barbed wire had come to the West to stay. It would be but a matter of time until the ranchers themselves would realize its value and adopt it.

In fact, this had already happened in many parts of Texas. In the Panhandle section there were thousands of miles of wire strung, and more being strung all the time. The Big Bend country was one of the last strongholds of the open range. But, Hatfield clearly foresaw, the open range was fast going the way of the bony, angular longhorn.

He smiled as he passed the grazing examples of improved stock. The cows feeding on Gordon Wagner's Running W range were heavy with succulent beef and showed the results of careful breeding.

"Yes, wire and the farmers are here to stay," he mused, "and the quicker fellers like Wagner admit the fact, the better off they'll be. Nobody can turn back the wheels of progress."

But he knew that such a situation as prevailed in the section at the moment was productive of trouble and bloodshed. It had happened before. He felt that his foremost chore was to prevent such happenings here.

"Somebody is out to make trouble," Hatfield thought. "Old Moses Brady wasn't lying when he said he didn't plant that dynamite. Whoever did it was deliberately trying to foment trouble. What I'd like to know more than anything else is why did those three fellers pick the spot they did to haul over those fence posts? Looks like they were tipped off by somebody to tackle that particular spot."

He fingered the section of broken rope tied to his saddle.

"This bit of busted twine may give me the answer," he mused. "I'm playing a hunch with it, and here's hoping it turns out to be a straight one."

It was nearly noon when Hatfield reached his destination. Marton proved to be a typical Border country cowtown, with board sidewalks, long lines of hitchracks, false fronts, lanterns hung on poles at the street corners to provide illumination. Every other building, it seemed, housed a saloon, dancehall, gambling joint or eating house. The crooked main street was deep in dust. There was a bustle of business in the general stores. A babble of conversation drifted through the open windows and over the swinging doors of the saloons.

HATFIELD rode slowly through the outskirts. He figured that, as was usual in county seats, the sheriff's office and the calaboose would both be housed in the building that served as a courthouse, and would be on the main street near the business section.

His surmise proved correct. He hitched Goldy at a convenient rack, crossed the street to the squat building and located a

door over which was a battered wooden sign lettered, "Sheriff's Office."

The door stood partly open. Hatfield entered without knocking. As he strode into the room, two men looked up from a desk at which they were sitting.

One was a florid, bulky individual with fat jowls, a rather loose mouth and squinty eyes set in rolls of flesh. On his sagging vest was pinned a large silver shield that proclaimed him sheriff of the county.

His companion was of a totally different stamp. Lean, lanky, with a rat-trap visage, his mouth was tight, his deeply set blue eyes very keen. Altogether he had the look of an able and adroit man. His hands, long, blue-veined, with supple, tapering fingers, rested on the desk before him.

Hatfield, who missed nothing, saw those hands abruptly grip the edge of the desk till the knuckles whitened.

The man's face, however, remained impassive, wearing only a look of polite inquiry.

"Howdy?" greeted the sheriff, "Something I can do for you?"

"I have a letter for you, suh," Hatfield said, drawing the missive from his pocket. "It's from Johnson, the manager of the Terlingua Mines."

The sheriff took the letter, opened it casually and glanced at the contents. Then he leaped to his feet, grabbed Hatfield's hand with what was apparently intended for great heartiness and pump-handled it vigorously. His own was very moist.

"Feller," he exclaimed, "I've already heard about you, and I'm plumb glad to meet you. Want to congratulate you on the plumb good chore you did. And here's somebody else who'll be glad to see you.

"I want yuh to know Judge Bascomb Price. The Terlingua Company was one of the judge's clients before he got elected to office and retired from private practice for a spell. Judge, this is Jim Hatfield they told us about when they brought in the bodies of those two owlhoots day before yesterday."

Bascomb Price rose to his feet and shook hands with a firm grip.

"This is a pleasure, Hatfield," he said in a peculiarly deep and resonant voice. "Sit down and tell us about it."

HATFIELD accepted the invitation. In a few quiet sentences, he recounted the happenings on the trail. The sheriff clucked in this throat. Bascomb Price nodded pontifically.

"Almighty smart work," he chuckled. "Those miscreants must have been mighty sold. Wait till they hear about what really happened. There'll be some fancy swearing over in the hills, or I'm a lot mistaken.

"But, Hatfield," he continued in graver tones, "you've made some bad enemies. That bunch has given us a world of trouble in the past year. The sheriff is on their trail, but so far they've outsmarted even him."

"They know every hole and crack in the hills," growled Sheriff Fulton. "Twice I've thought I had 'em cornered, but each time they've dodged the loop. I'll get 'em yet, though, dadblame 'em!"

He frowned ferociously as he spoke. Bascomb Price nodded agreement.

"It's just about time to eat," he remarked. "Suppose we go over to Queen High and put away a helpin'. Sheriff Fulton owns the Queen High and we'll get good service. This afternoon, the coroner will want to hold an inquest over those bodies. We waited till you got here, Hatfield. A lot of folks will be in town for the inquest. Want you to meet them."

The inquest was held a couple of hours later. It was short. The verdict was also short, and to the point. It congratulated Hatfield on having done a good chore and advised that the sheriff hustle up and polish off the rest of the sidewinders.

After the formalities were over, a number of cowmen came up to Hatfield to add their commendations to those of the coroner's jury.

Foremost was a big, beefy, powerful looking man with snapping black eyes and an arrogant expression. His mouth, Hatfield noticed, was finely formed and grin-quirked at the corners. The Lone Wolf was not at all surprised when he introduced himself as Gordon Wagner. He shook hands with great heartiness.

"Mighty glad to know you, son," he boomed. "Hope you'll see fit to stick around a spell. This section needs folks like you."

Hatfield smiled down at the old cattle baron, liking him at once, and understanding him.

"Reckon that sort of depends on you, suh," he said, passing the mine manager's

letter to Wagner.

Gordon Wagner read the letter, a pleased expression on his lined, bad-tempered old face. He shook hands again.

"Johnson says you're lookin' for a job." he said. "Well, you don't have to look any more, if you care to tie on with me. I'd want you anyhow, but right now I'm glad to get a few extra hands. Gettin' a whoppin' big herd together and a long and hard drive ahead of me.

"Sellin' the critters to the Dawes outfit down by the river. They're expandin' their holdin's—it's an eastern combine, you know—and want stock. You'll get to see the Landin' again, if you sign up. Reckon you could do without that, though, after what you went through down there."

"Was interesting, anyhow," Hatfield smiled reply. "I'll be plumb glad to sign with you, suh."

"Fine! Fine!" applauded Wagner. "Now, I want you to meet some of the boys. This here is Webb Kenton, who plumb outsmarted me in a deal but is all right just the same. Kenton, shake hands with Jim Hatfield. You know all about him already. Saw you in the courthouse."

WEBB Kenton's hand was like a steel vise. His darkly blue eyes raised a little to meet Hatfield's level green gaze, but very little. Hatfield reckoned Kenton within a couple of inches of his own height. Kenton's dark face was cameo-perfect, his mouth tight-lipped, his jaw long and powerful.

"Glad to know you, Hatfield," he acknowledged Wagner's introduction. "Hope you'll stay with us a long time, and I've a notion you will."

"Never can tell," the Lone Wolf agreed. " 'Pears to be a nice section with interesting folks in it."

"Would be nice if it waren't for them blankety-blank nesters over to the west," growled Wagner, his heavy face flushing. "And them what stands in with 'em," he added.

Kenton smiled, showing sharply pointed teeth of a singular whiteness, but did not comment.

"Be seein' you folks," he said, and strode away, walking with lithe grace, and very lightly for so large a man.

Sheriff Fulton strolled up at the moment. Wagner greeted him with a nod.

"Who you aim to appoint as deputy, now that Raines has left yuh?" he asked—to make conversation, Hatfield felt.

"Haven't decided yet," the sheriff replied. "I'll get somebody."

"Raines go back to dealin' cards?" Wagner asked.

"So he said," Fulton answered. "Said it was an easier way to make a livin' than dodgin' lead. I offered him his old job back, in my place, but he said he felt like movin' around a bit. Wanted to look the country over."

"Never saw a gambler who could stay put in one place for long," Wagner declared. "They either move on or get moved."

"Oh, Bob won't ever have any trouble; he's a straight dealer," the sheriff said.

"Always heard he was," Wagner admitted. "Well, be seein' you. Let's have a drink, Hatfield, and then, if you're agreeable, we'll ride down to my place. Reckon you passed it on your way here."

Hatfield nodded, recalling the big, comfortable looking ranchhouse advantageously placed on a rise that overlooked the trail to Marton. He had felt sure, as he rode past, that it was the *casa* of Gordon Wagner.

"A mighty fine looking place," he commented as they moved across the street together.

"Uh-huh, my dad built it," said Wagner. "About the best in the section, I reckon. The old man waren't the sort to stint."

AS THEY walked to the bar in the Queen High, Wagner's big form suddenly stiffened, his face flushed darkly. Following the direction of his hot gaze, Hatfield saw a slender, well-formed young man standing near the far end of the bar. He carried his right arm in a sling.

Wagner saw that Hatfield had noticed his irritation.

"That's Val Carver down there," he said, jerking his head toward the quiet drinker. "You'll hear about him sooner or later. He sides with the nesters and has caused me plenty of trouble. I busted him one the other day."

Hatfield glanced at his companion. "Considerable under your weight, wouldn't you say?" he remarked.

Hatfield spoke smilingly, but Wagner got the implied reproof. He glared at his

new hand.

But Hatfield's steady green eyes did not waver as they met Wagner's resentful look. And something in their level gaze appeared to make the cattle baron uncomfortable.

"Mebbe, I hadn't oughta done it," he grumbled, "but the young squirt riled me for fair. Accused me of cuttin' wire, somethin' I never done in my lfie. I come nigh to payin' for lettin' my temper get the best of me. He went for his gun. I managed to shoot first, but it was just plumb luck that I nicked him in the arm and made him drop his iron before he could pull trigger."

"Yes, I reckon it was lucky you just nicked his arm," Hatfield agreed. "A dead man doesn't make a soft pillow at night."

Wagner looked more uncomfortable. He 'lowed Hatfield might be right.

"Oh, to heck with him," he finished. "Let him go bunk with his nester friends. You ready to ride?"

MANY eyes followed Hatfield and Wagner as they rode out of town together. Among the interested eyes were those of Bascomb Price, Sheriff Fulton and Webb Kenton, owner of the Tumbling K. A little later, the three gathered in the sheriff's office and shut the door.

Bascomb Price instantly exploded, his voice shaking with fear and fury. He glared at Kenton.

"See what comes of shootin' that Ranger that day on the train!" he fairly snarled. "See what we're up against? I spotted the big hellion the minute I saw him. That's Bill McDowell's ace man! That's the Lone Wolf!"

Sheriff Fulton's breath exhaled in a reedy sigh. His loose mouth twitched. He glanced wildly around the shuttered room.

Webb Kenton didn't appear particularly impressed. "Well, what of it?" he demanded.

"Well, what of it!" mimicked Price. "You saw what he did to you down at the River, didn't you? Outsmarted the lot of you like you were a pack of sheep. Outsmarted you, outshot you. Killed four men on the boat. Killed Dwyer and Crowley on the trail, and both those fellows were poison with a gun. What of it, eh? I'd rather have the devil on my trail than the Lone Wolf. One thing is sure for certain, he's got to be gotten rid of, if we're to stay here.

"Oh, I know, it will mean a troop sent down here by McDowell. But I'd rather have the whole Border Batallion, and McDowell himself, than that fellow. It's one thing or the other, he must be gotten rid of, pronto, or we've got to pull out."

"We're not pullin' out," Kenton declared.

"Okay. You set up to be salty, and smart, Webb. Getting rid of him is your chore."

"I'll handle it," Kenton replied, with vicious emphasis. "It shouldn't be hard. Nobody down here is supposed to know he's a Ranger. I might pick a row with him, and—"

"And die!" Price interrupted. "I know you're good, but he'd make you look like a snail crawling up a slick log. There's not a man in the Southwest can go for a gun, facing him, and live."

"Don't reckon it will be necessary to face him," Kenton said. "Stop shiverin', Price. I'll take care of him."

"You'd better," Price warned. "Now, Fulton, you'd better appoint Bill Morgan deputy in place of Raines."

"Okay," nodded the sheriff. "Kenton, give me Raines' deputy badge."

"Raines' badge—I haven't got it," Kenton replied.

"You haven't! Where is it, then? Didn't you take it off Raines before you planted him?"

"Blazes!" exclaimed Kenton, "now I remember. Raines lent it to Crowley when Crowley rode into the Landin' to get the lowdown on when the steamboat would show up. He thought Crowley might need it to get questions answered. It must be in Crowley's pocket. Get it before he's planted."

"Blast it, don't you think I've gone through Crowley's clothes already, and Dwyer's too?" Sheriff Fulton demanded indignantly. "I took everything off 'em. There was no badge on either of 'em."

Bascomb Price swore a string of oaths. "Of course you didn't find it on Crowley!" he stormed. "I can tell you where that badge is right now—in Jim Hatfield's pocket. Of all the blankety-blank things to happen. He'll tie that badge up with Raines, sure as shooting."

"He can't prove anythin'," quavered Sheriff Fulton.

"No. But it will start him to thinking. And when that hellion starts thinking, look out!" said Price. "Kenton, you got to work fast."

CHAPTER VIII

Dam Builder

OBLIVIOUS of the fact that sentence of death had been passed on him, Jim Hatfield rode on with Gordon Wagner. The old cattleman was garrulous, and evidently very proud of his fine spread. He gave Hatfield a prolonged and detailed description of its advantages.

But he knew the cow business and Hatfield found his talk interesting.

"Only one thing bothers me," Wagner remarked at length. "I'm gettin' on in years and I've got nobody to leave all this to when I take the Big Jump. Never had but one kid, and he died before he growed up. Makes a feller feel sort of lost at times, Hatfield. Makes him wonder if what he's done is worth while, after all, when he gets on and there's nobody dependin' on him."

Hatfield glanced at the old man, and his strangely colored eyes were all kindness.

"A man in your position, suh, has lots of folks depending on him, if he'll only recognize and admit the fact," he said.

Wagner shot him a puzzled look. "What you mean by that, Hatfield?" he asked.

"I mean," Hatfield told him, "that you are a leader in your section. Your neighbors defer to your opinions. You can line them up right. You can help them when they need help. It's to a man's advantage, suh, to have his neighbors friendly to him—all his neighbors."

Wagner tugged his mustache, and seemed at a loss for words. Hatfield tried a shot in the dark.

"I've a notion you might have realized something of that last Election Day," he remarked.

Wagner shot him another look. "The little fellers I never paid much attention to did help the nesters lick us," he grumbled.

"And why were the farmers so anxious to hand you a licking?" Hatfield asked.

"Because they're no good and don't like cowmen," Wagner growled.

"And why don't they like cowmen?" Hatfield persisted. "Wonder if the cowmen ever do anything to them to cause them to dislike cowmen?"

Old Gordon rumbled and snorted. "Them horned toads didn't have no business gettin' hold of that land," he declared. "That was always open range."

"Did you really need that land west of the creek to make your spread prosperous and self-sustaining?" Hatfield asked gently.

"I don't see what that's got to do with it," said Wagner.

HATFIELD looked contemplative. "On my dad's place, over east of here, we used to raise quite a few pigs," he remarked. "I remember one big hog in particular we had one year. He was a buster. One of the biggest and toughest boars I ever saw. But he was all hog. At feeding time, unless he was watched, he'd shoulder all the little pigs aside and gobble everything he could.

"But when he was plumb full, he still wasn't satisfied. He'd shove and shoulder, get both feet in the trough, and try to keep the little fellers from getting anything at all. One day, I rec'lect, he got plumb in the trough and laid down."

Hatfield paused, little crinkles at the corners of his eyes.

"And then what happened?" asked Wagner.

"Well," Hatfield finished, "he hadn't even started eating yet, that day. And when he shoved everybody else aside and got into the trough, he turned it over. All the feed was spilled and everybody, including himself, went hungry."

Gordon Wagner flushed. His mustache bristled. Then suddenly his fine old mouth quirked at the corners. His snapping eyes grin-wrinkled.

"Hatfield," he chuckled, "you're a strange sort of feller. I just met you a coupla hours back, but it seems I've knowed you four years. Do you always affect folks this way, fust off?"

Hatfield smiled. "It's not always necessary," he replied.

Wagner pondered that one a moment,

and decided not to answer. But Hatfield was not displeased. From the look in the cattle baron's eyes, he shrewdly surmised that Gordon Wagner was doing some serious thinking.

"Well, here we are at the *casa*," the rancher announced as they turned into the yard and approached the big house in its grove of ancient oaks. "We'll drop our cayuses in the corral and let the wranglers look after 'em. There's Happy Beeler, my range boss, over there. Hi-yuh, Happy, come here."

A mournful looking individual built something like an animated splinter slouched down the veranda steps.

"Happy, I want you to know Jim Hatfield," Wagner introduced the new hand. "He's signed up with us, and he's been tellin' me funny stories."

"That's nice," Beeler said sadly as he shook hands.

"You introduce him to the boys as they drift in," Wagner directed. "After you stow your rig, Hatfield, come up to the house."

Hatfield removed Goldy's saddle and shouldered it. Beeler opened the corral gate and let the big sorrel in to graze. Then he led the way to the bunkhouse.

OUTSIDE the building, Hatfield paused an instant. Nearby a fresh-faced young cowboy was industriously stretching a new rope between two trees.

"That's Tommy Eden," Beeler remarked. "Busted his twine yesterday and's gettin' a new one into shape. Them young squirts are always bustin' somethin', except their necks. Their luck always seems to hold there. There's an empty peg for your saddle. I'm goin' over to the barn. See you later."

After stowing his gear, Hatfield sauntered out of the bunkhouse. He paused to watch the young cowboy shaping his rope.

"Considerable of a chore," he remarked. Eden nodded, and grinned in friendly fashion.

"A chore I always hated," Hatfield continued. "I always used to splice a busted rope if I had both ends. Maybe you got part of your old twine left. Yes? Wait a minute."

He sauntered back into the bunkhouse. A moment later he reappeared, swinging a looped rope in his hand. He passed the broken twine to Eden.

"Maybe you could use this," he remarked seriously. "A feller tied it to something last night he wanted mighty bad to let go of."

With a nod, he passed on to the ranchhouse. Tommy Eden glanced at the coil of rope, started to lay it aside. Suddenly he stiffened, his eyes dilated, jerked up and stared after Hatfield's broad back. The color drained from his face, leaving it white to the lips. He dropped the rope as if it had abruptly become red hot, stooped and picked it up again. Then, with a furtive movement, he stuffed the coil inside his shirt, and headed for the bunkhouse, in a hurry.

As he mounted the veranda steps, Hatfield glanced over his shoulder, just in time to see Tommy Eden dive into the bunkhouse. He chuckled, his green eyes sunny, and entered the ranchhouse in answer to old Gordon's booming invitation to come on in.

The big living room of the *casa* was comfortably furnished, with evidence on all sides that its owner was a man of wealth and considerable taste. Hatfield seated himself in an easy chair and rolled a cigarette. Gordon Wagner sat by the open window, gazing into the gathering twilight.

He nodded to Hatfield, and for some minutes was silent.

"This is the hour I always like best," he said, at length. "When the hills are all flamin' purple and the rangeland looks like red wine had been spilled all over it. When things are still and peaceful, and a mite sad. It's a mighty purty country, Hatfield, especially at this hour. Makes a feller sort of sorry that he wasted so many of them. You get to thinkin' about them things as you grow older, I reckon. Guess I've been alone too long."

Jim Hatfield rose to his feet and walked to the window. He, too, gazed upon the glowing beauty of the scene with eyes of appreciation.

OLD Gordon glanced up at him, standing tall and straight as a young pine of the forest, glorious in his youth and strength. And Gordon Wagner's eyes were a trifle wistful. Perhaps he was thinking of his own graying hair and the

lines the passing years had etched in his face.

Hatfield suddenly smiled down at him. "Sort of like a man's life, if he's lived it right, suh," he said. "Growing quiet and peaceful and good to look upon. Quiet and peace, and then—the dark."

"And sleep," Gordon Wagner said heavily. He was silent again.

"The boys are ridin' in," he said, a little later. "About time for chuck."

Shortly afterward, they repaired to the big dining room in answer to the cook's bellow. Here Hatfield met the rest of the Running W hands, a likeable bunch, he decided. More than once in the course of the meal he caught young Tommy Eden's glance in his direction. Two other young fellows, who sat on either side of Eden, also appeared to be bothered about something. Hatfield stifled a chuckle.

"I've a notion my hunch is playing straight," he told himself.

When they rose from the table, Gordon Wagner beckoned Hatfield to follow him to the living room. The other hands clumped out through the kitchen.

"Yuh might as well bunk here in the house," Wagner told Hatfield. "Take the second room to the right of the stair head. Happy Beeler and a couple of the older fellers sleep here. Tomorrow, you and me will ride over the spread together and you can get a lowdown on things."

"Okay," Hatfield agreed. "I'll slip down to the bunkhouse and get my pouches. Got some spare clothes in 'em."

As Hatfield descended the veranda steps, a shadow disengaged itself from a nearby tree trunk. A moment later, Hatfield recognized Tommy Eden.

"Feller," Eden whispered, falling in step with the Ranger, "you didn't tell the Old Man where you find that hunk of rope, did yuh?"

"Nope," Hatfield replied, and waited.

"For Pete's sake, don't!" Eden implored him. "He'd take my hide off, and Smoky's and Toby's, too, if he knowed we—we—what happened last night."

Hatfield halted, and turned to face the cowboy.

"Eden," he said, "just why did you pick that particular spot to cut wire?"

THE cowboy hesitated. "Looks like," he said at length, "you got us dead to rights and can twist our tails proper if you're a mind to. It was just a loco notion we got, mebbe from too much red-eye. We was in the Queen High in town and the talk got around to the farmers and the wire cuttin' what's been goin' on. We heard Webb Kenton tell Chuck Davis, the deputy sheriff, that the farmers were guardin' their wheat fields with long guns and that it would be mighty unhealthy for anybody to fool around there.

"Davis said that was so, but it would be a good joke on 'em if somebody cut the wire at their corn fields where they weren't watchin'. Me and Toby and Smoky got to talkin' about that as we rode home. We decided it would be a good joke."

"Came nigh onto being a mighty serious joke for all of you," Hatfield remarked.

Tommy Eden wiped his brow, although the evening was cool.

"You're dad burned right," he said. "Golly, I can still hear that dynamite. It made a old man out of me before my time, feller. Uh-huh, we was plumb lucky we didn't happen to have any nippers with us. Smoky 'lowed it would be easy to pull over some posts with our ropes. I don't aim to go within forty yards of a post again."

"See that you don't, and I'll forget the whole thing," Hatfield promised.

"That's fine," Eden replied, with a deep sigh of relief. "I'll tell Smoky and Toby so they can sleep tonight. They're scairt as I was."

After retiring to his comfortable room on the second floor, Hatfield sat for a long time by the open window, smoking, and thinking deeply. The moon had risen and the prairie was flooded with silver light. The ranch buildings were dark and silent. Only the occasional stamp or snort of a horse in the nearby corral broke the silence.

Then, somewhere, a coyote yipped in an irritated fashion. An owl whined a querulous answer. And from the distant hills came, faint, but clear, the lonely, hauntingly beautiful plaint of a hunting wolf.

Still Hatfield sat by the window, although the other occupants of *casa* and bunkhouse were wrapped in sleep. Suddenly he uttered an exclamation. From his pocket he drew something that glittered in the moonlight. It was the nickel

deputy sheriff's badge he took off the dead owlhoot in the clearing beside the Terlingua Trail. He turned it over in his slim fingers, and gazed at it, the concentration furrow deep between his black brows.

"I wonder," he mused. "I wonder just where this darn thing fits into the tangle? I figured that horned toad stole it somewhere, but I wonder! Could this thing have been given him, or lent him? That deputy sheriff, Blaine, I think they called him, who all of a sudden shows up missing. Wonder if he fits in with this somehow? It seems ridiculous, but I wonder.

"That sheriff feller is a sort of unsavory looking character, all right. And that lantern-jawed lawyer who got himself elected judge—when I stepped into the sheriff's office today, he darn near turned the table over. He kept his face straight, but something sure upset him bad. Just what is going on in this section, anyhow? I sure wish I'd got a look at those two owlhoots the driver and the guards of the gold wagon evidently downed.

"Those fellers who left the clearing and the wagon to fetch the pack mules must have taken them along, roped to the backs of their horses, chances are. Now why were they so anxious to dispose of them, instead of dumping them out of the wagon there in the clearing? 'Pears they didn't hanker for anybody to get a look at them. Well, it's a funny mess, but I'm beginning to get another hunch. Maybe I'll be able to tie onto something tomorrow when I ride the range with Wagner. And now I figure a little shut-eye is in order."

RIGHT after breakfast the following morning, Hatfield and Wagner started on their ride. They worked west, at first, reached the banks of Terloga Creek and rode beside the hurrying water of the broad stream. West of the creek were the farm lands. Wagner glowered at the taut strands of rusty wire.

"That's what's ruinin' the cow country," he growled.

Hatfield gazed across the creek. Beyond the wire were great stands of wheat, corn, soy beans and alfalfa.

"Mighty good forage there," he commented, inconsequentially. "A field like that would keep a cowman from going busted in bad blizzard weather when the cows can't graze."

Old Gordon shot him a hostile glance. "We don't have many blizzards down here," he grunted.

"But when we do, it's a lulu," Hatfield replied. "Reckon blizzards have cost you considerable at one time or another, suh."

Wagner 'lowed it was so. His eyes rested on the green fields beyond the wire.

"Those fellers work hard to make a living," Hatfield remarked. "And they don't get over much, at that. I sure slept well in that good bed last night, suh. A nice big room, too. And your *casa* is a mighty nice place to live in. Cool in summer. Warm and comfortable in winter. Nice to be well fixed and not have to worry about anything. Not even any kids to worry about—whether they're going to get an education, and the other things due them.

"Some folks have lots of kids, which is a fine thing, too. But they want those kids to be happy and live well, and get out of life what they should get by working hard and living square and being considerate

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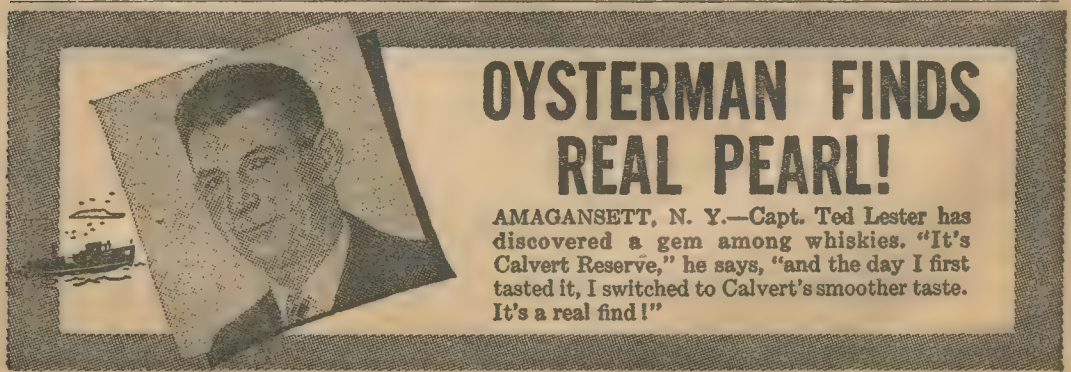
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of other folks. If your kid had lived, suh, I reckon he'd have had everything he needed, and a chance to get started right in life."

Old Gordon tugged his mustache, squirmed in his saddle. Suddenly he whirled about to face his new hand.

"Hatfield," he rumbled, "you don't have to go and make me feel like a blankety-blanked horned toad, or like that big hog you were tellin' me about yesterday."

Jim Hatfield glanced down at him, his eyes mirthful. "Now, suh," he protested, "I wouldn't think of doing anything like that. After all, suh, I'm working for you. I'm just a jigger you gave a job to when he was looking for one."

Old Gordon snorted. "I'm beginnin' to wonder about that," he declared. "I've had lots of hands workin' for me in my time, but I never before had one talk to be like I was a little squirt perched on a stool with a dunce cap on my head. Just who in blazes are you, Hatfield?"

"Told you my name, suh," the Ranger replied. "It's the one I was born to. And I reckon before the week's over you'll agree I'm a cowhand, a sort of one, anyhow. Say, those are mighty fine looking cows in that bunch over there. Improved stock, I see. How many head did you say will be in that herd you're shipping down to the Dawes ranch?"

SATISFIED to let the seed he had planted in the old cattle baron's mind do its own growing for a while, Hatfield adroitly steered the conversation into other channels. Wagner was a real cowman, and he became animated as he explained the workings of his big spread. They rode on steadily for a couple of hours, constantly trending to the south. Finally, ahead loomed a tall and broad ridge with Terloga Creek washing its base as it flowed westward to the hills.

Wagner jerked his thumb toward the ridge.

"Down the other side of the sag is Webb Kenton's spread," he announced. "I owned that land once but I sold out to Kenton, figgerin' I was puttin' over a good deal. But it was Kenton what was puttin' one over. Like to see how he did it? I'll tell you about it as we ride over the hill."

As they rode up the long slope, Hatfield again heard the story with variations of Kenton's shrewdness and the tapping of the underground waters of Terloga Creek. But not until they rode down the far side of the sag did he fully appreciate the Tumbling K owner's sagacity and unusual ability.

"There she is," said Wagner, gesturing at the torrent of sparkling water pouring down the face of the cliff. "Hundreds of times, I reckon, I rode past them dad-blamed cliffs and saw the ferns and lichens growin' on 'em when everything else was dry and burned up. And I never figgered what it meant.

"But Kenton figgered what it meant, mighty fast," he continued with a grimace. "He knowed there must be moisture, seepin' out of the cliff to cause that truck to grow there. He figgered there'd be plenty of water not far behind them cracked rocks. He was right. And look how the jigger spreads the water over the land. Smart? Instead of one crik runnin' along, he's got half a dozen tumblin' out over his range. Plumb perfect!"

Wordless, Hatfield stared at the exhibition of more than a little engineering skill and knowledge spread before his eyes.

At the base of the cliff the falling water had scored a deep catch basin and channel. But a few hundred yards from the base of the cliff, an astoundingly clever system of dams set at angles had been constructed. By means of which, a portion of the water was shunted this way and that into channels prepared to receive it. As Wagner said, Kenton had contrived a number of streams to flow across his land and fill his water holes.

But it was the construction of the dams that interested Hatfield most. They were contrived with cribbings of stout timbers. The cribbings were filled with earth and stone, providing an efficient barrier that turned the water as desired.

The angling of the dams was ingenious and highly productive of results.

"Most jiggers would have just built a dam across the main creek and conveyed the water over the land by a system of irrigation ditches," Hatfield mused, "But that gent plumb full of savvy contrived to make the water do the work itself. He took advantage of the natural slope of the land from the cliff face and formed artificial brooks. Unlike irrigation ditches, they don't silt up but scour out their own

channels. In consequence, the flow is never retarded. Smart! Plumb smart!"

He raised his eyes as he spoke and stared southward toward the distant and unseen Rio Grande. He glanced back again at the cunningly contrived cribbings. The concentration furrow was deep between his black brows and his eyes had subtly changed color until they were as coldly gray as the beetling cliff walls rising on either side of the rushing water. One hand slid into his side pocket and fingered the mysterious deputy sheriff's badge.

CHAPTER IX

Showdown

A BUSY week followed for Hatfield and the rest of the Running W outfit. Getting the big trail herd together was considerable of a chore, for the whole wide region was open range and a great deal of cutting out was involved.

Very quickly, Gordon Wagner was convinced that he had not in many a long day hired such a top hand as Jim Hatfield proved to be.

"I can't give that big jigger orders," Happy Beeler, the range boss, complained sadly. "He knows more about it all than I do and is always a jump ahead of me."

"Leave him alone," growled Wagner. "He knows what to do, and he'll do it."

"I've a notion," he added reflectively, "that he's a heap more used to givin' orders than takin' 'em. He's sure got a way of bringin' a man around to his own brand of thinkin'. Does it so smooth you don't realize what's goin' on."

"You figger he's been a range boss somewhere?" Beeler asked.

"Uh-huh," Wagner replied cryptically. "I've a notion he's been a range boss, all right, on a mighty big range. He's sure puzzlin'."

Beeler stared at the owner, but Wagner did not choose to say more.

One result of the conversation was, Hatfield was left very much on his own. Beeler did not attempt to tell him what to do and did not assign him to any particular work, which enabled Hatfield to govern his own movements.

While performing his tasks with quiet efficiency, Hatfield found time to take careful note of his surroundings. He took a great interest in the foothills of the Santiagos, to the southwest. The herd would skirt those hills and follow the Comanche Trail through the notch to the more level land beyond.

Several times Hatfield spotted riders high up on the hill slopes, riders who did not descend to the rangeland to take part in the activities there. Quite a few riders from other spreads had joined the Running W, taking advantage of the opportunity to collect bunches of their cows for one purpose or another.

"Somebody up there is mighty interested in what's going on down here," the Lone Wolf figured. "And they're taking particular pains to keep out of sight as much as possible. Well, this herd represents a heap of dinero, and there's a ready market for wet cows across the Rio Grande. All the damp-back critters don't come north from Mexico. Some make a sort of round trip, leaving here for Mexico and coming back across the Line in New Mexico or Arizona. A herd like this would provide a rich haul for enterprising gents with savvy and guts. And there are lots of places between here and Dawes Landing that are plumb suited for such operations.

"And I've a notion those Scarlet Rider gents missed that ninety thousand dollars they didn't get last week. That sort of a bunch is always bad in need of money, and the feller heading the pack has to provide it if he wants to hold them together. A try for Wagner's cows wouldn't be at all out of order. The big question is, just where would they be liable to make the try? I've got a hunch about that, and I think I'll play it."

Playing his hunch, Hatfield visited with Wagner in the living room, after supper.

"Like to have a little talk with you, suh," Hatfield told him.

"Fine," Wagner said. "I feel sort of like talkin'. Gets lonesome here sometimes, especially in the evenin', when Beeler's out courtin' and the boys are playin' poker. What's on your mind, son?"

HATFIELD drew up a chair to the table at which Wagner was sitting. He fumbled an instant with a cunningly concealed secret pocket in his broad

leather belt. He laid something on the table between them.

Gordon Wagner stared at the object—a gleaming silver star set on a silver circle. The feared and honored badge of the Texas Rangers. But Wagner did not evince any great surprise.

"Might have knowed it." he said. "You do things like a Ranger. McDowell send you over here?"

"That's right," Hatfield replied. "Captain Bill figured things here needed a mite of looking over. I'd like to ask you a few questions, suh, after I tell you just what I've learned here."

Wagner listened with the greatest attention as Hatfield recounted the various incidents that attended his sojourn in the section. He examined the deputy sheriff's badge and agreed that it looked very much like those worn by Chuck Davis and by Bob Raines, who presumably departed for Arizona about the time the Scarlet Riders made their try for the Terlingua Mine gold.

"But I couldn't say more'n that," he admitted. "It just looks to be the same, so far as I can see. I never noticed 'em particular. And after all, sheriffs usually keep quite a few of these things on hand, for special deputies, and so on. I never thought much of Fulton and his crowd, but they were sort of on the other side of the fence, you know, and that's liable to influence a feller's judgment.

"Fulton seems to have done a purty good job of sheriffin' since he got in. He got a widelooped herd back for me and busted up a raidin' bunch from the other side of the Rio Grande. He ain't made any showin' against the Scarlet Riders, but then nobody else has either. That is till you come along. Would 'pear you've been thinnin' 'em out a bit since you hit the section.

"Now as to Webb Kenton. Nobody seems to know much about him. He keeps to hisself, and his hands don't mix much. He showed up here about three years back. Sort of intimated he come from Arizona. Nobody questioned that. Didn't concern anybody, and, as you know, folks in this country ain't much on askin' questions as to where a feller comes from and so on. Take him for what he shows and proves to be. Always seemed to be a square jigger. I sure would have never suspected him to be mixed up in no doin's."

"I have nothing on him," Hatfield admitted frankly. "Only, I'd be willing to swear that the man who built those dams on his land and the man who built that cribbing into the Rio Grande to wreck the steamer are the same. Those chores evinced an engineering knowledge that isn't ordinary, and I can't conceive of two such men mavericking around in cow country like this. Though of course it is possible. Now what do you know about Bascomb Price?"

"Price showed here the first time a little more than three years ago," Wagner replied.

"'Bout the same time as Kenton," Hatfield interpolated quickly.

"A few months before, I'd say," Wagner corrected. "He claims to be from California originally. I've a notion mebbe he is. He had letters and papers showin' he'd been admitted to the Bar there. And he had a bank reference. One thing is sure for certain, he's a mighty able lawyer and a darned smart jigger in other ways. It was Price rigged the election against us."

"And he and Kenton never appeared particularly friendly?"

WAGNER shook his head. "Never seemed to pay any attention to each other. As I said, Kenton keeps to himself. Price circulates around, but I don't rec'lect ever seein' him even talkin' to Kenton."

"And what about the sheriff?"

"He's been here a couple of years. Bought the Queen High when he come here. Nothin' mysterious about him. He's from over New Mexico way. Folks here knew him when he ran a saloon in Pantono, not far the other side the state line. Price took to eatin' and loafin' in his place not long after he opened up. But lots of folks did that. Fulton is a good saloon man and runs straight games. He's a mixer, like Price. That's how he come to run for sheriff, I reckon. I've heerd he loans the farmers money when they need some ready cash. Loans to the little cowmen, too."

Hatfield nodded, and considered what Wagner had told him.

"And it all adds up to practically noth-

ing," he told the cowman. "If I had time to put Captain McDowell to tracing those fellows back to where they came from and getting a line-up on what they used to be and do, we might have something. But that takes time, and meanwhile the Scarlet Rider bunch, whether they're tied up with them or not, won't be going to sleep in their hulls. Wagner, I'm going to play a hunch, and I want you to help me."

For several minutes he talked earnestly. Gordon Wagner's eyes widened with astonishment.

"And you really think the sidewinders might make a try for my herd?" he demanded. "There'll be ten cowhands, good ones, ridin' with that herd, Hatfield."

"Cowhands have to sleep," Hatfield told him grimly. "And that bunch is plenty salty and with plenty of savvy. Give them one good chance and they'll put it over. That herd counts for plenty of dinero, Wagner, and in this section, cows are the best pickings for a bunch like them.

"For two days, now, somebody in the hills has been keeping tabs on us. I spotted them several times. They did the same thing down on the Rio Grande when the steamer was working up the river. Yes, give them a good chance and I've a prime notion they'll make a try for those cows. Our chore is to arrange a chance for them, or what will look like a good chance."

"Where you figger they'd make the try?" Wagner asked.

"Certainly not north of Persimmon Gap," Hatfield replied. "The pull up to the notch is a hard one, and the drive to the river too long. But south of the Gap are plenty of likely spots. For instance, if the herd were to bed down for the night on the flats near where the trail to Terlingua joins with the Comanche, that would be made to order for a raid.

"The Terlingua Trail runs between brush grown slopes that form almost a canyon. It's a perfect hole-up, and a raiding bunch could swoop out of there and be all over the herd before anybody not particularly on the lookout knew what was happening. Then from there to the Boquillas Crossing of the Rio Grande is a comparatively easy drive."

Gordon Wagner tugged his mustache, frowned, and considered.

"Okay," he said at length, "I'll string along with you. Hand out the powders, now, and I'll take care of the arrangements."

Two days later, the trail herd got under way. It was a big herd of nearly three thousand head of prime stock. As Hatfield said, it represented a lot of money and would be a temptation to any owlhoot bunch on the lookout for opportunity. Across the rangeland it rolled south by slightly west toward the high notch that was the pass through the Santiago.

Just before the drive got under way, Gordon Wagner gave Happy Beeler some orders that caused the mournful range boss to open his eyes.

"And if Hatfield tells you to do somethin'," Wagner concluded, "you do it, and don't arg'fy and don't ask questions."

THE night before the Running W drive got under way, Webb Kenton slipped into Bascomb Price's office. Sheriff Fulton and his deputy, Chuck Davis, were already here. Bascomb Price was ill at ease. His face twitched, his fingers drummed the table top.

"Well?" he said.

"Well," Kenton repeated, "everything is all set. If we get anything like a decent break, we'll make a rich haul and get rid of Senor Lone Wolf at the same time. Gettin' rid of that hellion is what I have in mind over everything else."

"There musn't be any slips this time," said Price. "In fact, there aren't going to be any slips. I'm going along this time to make sure there aren't."

Kenton shrugged his broad shoulders. "Just as you say," he replied. "Gosh! this would be a haul for somebody, wouldn't it? The judge and the sheriff of the county both in the same loop."

"That'll be enough of that!" rasped Price. "All right, let's get out of here. Everybody's asleep now, if they're ever going to be."

At an easy pace the trail herd rolled south, for Beeler was saving the cows for the hard pull up to Persimmon Gap.

Happy Beeler rode with the herd, keeping a watchful eye on everything. Being familiar with the route and having already decided on his bedding down places, he did not need to scout ahead. Nobody rode directly in front of the herd, but near the head of the marching column were the point men, on either side of the herd. It

was their duty to act as pilots and to veer the herd when a change of direction was desired.

About a third of the way back behind the point men came the swing riders, where the herd began to bend in case of a change of course. Another third of the way back rode the flank riders whose duty was to aid the swing men in blocking any tendency on the part of the cows to sideways wandering, and to drive off any foreign cows that might try to join up with the marching herd.

Behind the herd, cursing the heat and the dust and the stragglers, came the drag riders. Following the cattle were the remuda of spare horses and the chuckwagon.

Jim Hatfield rode drag, the most disagreeable post on the drive, but also the least conspicuous. He had a reason for that.

The first night out, the herd bedded down in sight of Persimmon Gap, but a few miles to the north.

And that night well after full dark had descended, old Gordon Wagner rode away from the Running W. With him rode seven of his oldest and most trusted hands. South they rode, grim and purposeful, following in the wake of the trail herd.

They did not join with the herd, however. A couple of miles north of the bedding ground, they turned off the trail and entered a thick grove. As they approached the stand of trees, between the trunks of which grew much tall underbrush, a horseman rode forward to meet them.

"Hi-yuh, Hatfield?" Wagner greeted. "See you got here first."

"Yes, I didn't have far to come," the Lone Wolf replied. "I've picked out a good place for us to hole up. Figure we can risk a small fire and boil some coffee."

AT DAYBREAK, the herd was on the move. But Jim Hatfield was now riding drag. His place had been taken by a tall cowboy mounted on a sorrel horse that at a distance could easily be mistaken for Goldy.

"I decided not to miss any bets, if somebody happened to be keeping tabs, although that is sort of unlikely this far north," Hatfield explained to Wagner. "For I'm beginning to have a hunch those gents might be sort of interested in me. I've a feeling maybe Price recognized me as soon as he saw me. He sure acted funny when I stepped into the sheriff's office."

"Uh-huh, and they'd sure be out to get you, if he did," Wagner growled.

"Hope so," Hatfield replied cheerfully.

"You hope so!"

"That's right. If they are, it will be an added inducement for them to make a raid on the drive."

Old Gordon wagged his head and rumbled in his throat.

The shadows were long the following afternoon when Hatfield and his posse rode out of the grove.

"I figure we're safe in taking the chance now," he told Wagner. "We'll make it to the Gap and wait there till full dark. Then we'll head down the far slope, fast. I reckon nothing will happen until about midnight, when everybody is sleepiest, but we can't take any chances. It's a fairly long drive to the Rio Grande, and the horned toads will want to get across the River before it is full light."

In the shadowy Gap they waited until the twilight had deepened to night and the stars were shining brightly in a clear sky. Then they sent their horses down the long slope at a fast pace. Until they were within a mile of the level ground they did not slow. Then they proceeded with great caution, finally holing up in a dense thicket from which they had a clear view of the bedded herd and the dark mouth of the hollow from which flowed the Terlingua Trail to join with the broad Comanche.

In the still night, the great herd rested peacefully with contented rumblings. A couple of night hawks sat their horses in the shadow of the growth, now and then taking a chance and riding into full view. On a little bench beside a dying fire, were what appeared to be sleeping cowhands rolled up in their blankets. The dark bulk of the chuckwagon stood nearby.

The great clock in the sky wheeled westward.

The dying moon rose in the east casting a wan light over the scene.

"Enough to shoot by," Hatfield remarked with satisfaction.

"Uh-huh, if there's anything to shoot at," grunted Wagner. "It's gettin' mighty late, Hatfield. I'm beginnin' to be scairt we're ridin' a cold trail."

"Maybe," Hatfield admitted, "but we'll wait."

Another hour passed. Midnight was close. And still all was quiet and peaceful.

AND then abruptly Hatfield's keen ears caught a sound, the tiniest of clickings, as if a stumbling hoof had overturned a small stone. He whispered a warning to his companions. Tense, expectant, nerves stretched to the breaking point, the possemen waited. Even the Lone Wolf was affected by the crawling uncertainty. He realized that the palms of his hands were moist. He rubbed them on his chaps to dry them. Wet hands and fast gun work don't go well together.

And then, without sound or warning, dark shapes loomed in the gloom of the gap from which ran the Terlingua Trail. They materialized into a number of horsemen moving their mounts forward at a crawl. Another moment of chilling waiting.

With the suddenness of a thunderclap, the quiet night exploded into blazing action. A roar of gunfire shattered the silence. The blanket rolls beside the fire jerked and twitched as they were hammered by a hail of bullets. The cattle came to their feet with terrified bawlings. Yelling and shooting, the raiders swept from the mouth of the hollow.

But louder yet was the yell and shriller the scream as the posse rolled from the grove on drumming hoofs. Jim Hatfield's voice rolled in thunder across the flats—

"In the name of the State of Texas! Throw down your arms! You are under arrest!"

Again the night blazed with gunfire. Lead whistled about the posse. But the speeding riders afforded a poor target in the dim light. While the demoralized owlhoots, in a close huddle, were an excellent mark. The boom of Hatfield's Colts was echoed by the crashing of his companions' guns.

Saddles were emptied at that first murderous volley. Two more raiders went down as Hatfield's guns gushed fire and smoke. The others wheeled their horses to scatter. And from the growth beside the bench bellowed a second storm of lead. The Running W hands holed up there were in action.

That settled it. Hands were raised. Voices howled for mercy. And from the milling press, a tall black horse darted to go thundering down the Comanche Trail. Hatfield had a glimpse of a tall and broad-shouldered figure hunched in the saddle. A masked face, glowing red in the moonlight, turned back for an instant, then wheeled to the front.

Hatfield's voice rang out. "Trail, Goldy, trail!"

Instantly the great sorrel shot forward, weaving in and out of the posse, flashing past the handful of surrendered owlhoots and the bodies strewn on the trail. He dodged the milling cows, swerved back to the trail and raced on, slugging his head above the bit, eyes rolling, nostrils flaring red. His steely legs shot backward like pistons as he fairly poured his long body over the ground.

Ahead, the big black was going strong. But he didn't have a chance. Slowly Goldy closed the distance. The rider twisted in his saddle and sent shot after shot whining back at his pursuer.

Grimly, Hatfield held his fire, although he heard the whistle of lead and its lethal breath fanned his face.

The owlhoot abruptly gave it up. He jerked his horse to a slithering halt, whirled him on a dime and fired point-blank at the Ranger.

HATFIELD slewed far sideways in his saddle and his gun blazed over Goldy's arching neck. Again and again he fired. He felt the burn of a bullet along his cheek. Another nicked his left arm. Then he saw the tall figure of the owlhoot topple in his saddle, reel, slump, and thud to the ground.

Hatfield dismounted and strode forward. He bent over the prostrate man, ripped the scarlet mask from his face, revealing the blood smeared face of Webb Kenton. Before the dying man's eyes he held the star of the Rangers.

"Even up for young Tom Shafer, Kenton," he said.

Webb Kenton's lips moved in a last vindictive curse. He stiffened, fell back, and was still. Hatfield mounted Goldy and rode back to the flats.

He found plenty of activity there. The fire had been built up. Cowboys were bunching and quieting the cattle. By the

fire were four prisoners, securely tied up.

"Here's that blankety-blank tinhorn lawyer, Bascomb Price, with a hole between his eyes," somebody shouted exultantly.

"And here's Craig Fulton with a busted arm," Gordon Wagner added. "Come and look him over, Hatfield. He's a prize specimen."

Hatfield strode over to the moaning, fear-crazed sheriff and looked him up and down with cold eyes.

"It'll take a stout rope to bust your fat neck, Fulton, but I reckon they'll find one strong enough," he observed cheerfully. "Ready to talk?"

Fulton instantly burst into a torrent of speech.

"He tied up the loose ends for us, all right," Hatfield agreed with Gordon Wagner as they sat beside the fire drinking coffee. "Price was from California, as you thought. He worked with Kenton over there and got himself disbarred for crooked work in land deals. Was headed for the penitentiary when Kenton and his bunch helped him break jail and get away.

"They made their getaway to Mexico and holed up there a couple of years, working at smuggling and wide-looping cows across from Arizona. When it got too hot for them there, they decided to work farther east. Price scouted ahead and picked the Big Bend country, over here. He sent for Kenton and the others. They brought in Fulton and a couple of his off-color bunch. Kenton knew Fulton before he set up in business in New Mexico."

"A prime bunch of sidewinders, all right," growled Wagner.

"Yes," Hatfield agreed. "Kenton was plumb smart and with considerable education. But he couldn't stay straight. And of course his bunch insisted on easy money. Price wanted to go easy and build up here inside the law. If Kenton had agreed, he might have done well by himself and the rest of them. But Kenton couldn't see it that way and Price had to string along with him.

"Price, of course, as a lawyer and then a judge, could get the lowdown on anything that went on in the section. In fact, that's what got me to thinking about him right after I saw him. It was certain that the Scarlet Riders knew the Terlingua Mines money was coming in by way of the Rio Grande.

"The way they worked to get it took time, so they had to know well in advance of its arrival. Price drew up the papers for the purchase of lands by the Terlingua Company, with cash payment specified. He knew, of course, all about how the money was to be sent, and tipped off the bunch. He was smart, but not quite smart enough."

"Not smart enough to buck the Lone Wolf, that's sure for certain," Wagner declared emphatically.

At daybreak the trail herd rolled south. Hatfield, Wagner and the posse headed north with the prisoners. One of the cowhands had a broken arm, which Hatfield had skillfully set and splinted. Three others suffered from minor flesh wounds that Hatfield decided would be of little consequence.

MARTON buzzed with excitement and conjecture when the news got around. With the prisoners locked up, Hatfield sat in the sheriff's office with Wagner and Charley Dice, the former judge, defeated by Bascomb Price for re-election.

"We're sure short of county officials," Wagner chuckled. "Charley here will accept the appointment and fill out the office of judge, but I don't know who we'll get for sheriff. John Snyder is sick—they say he has Bright's disease, and it's doubtful if he'll get well."

"I've got a suggestion to make," Hatfield said. "Why not appoint Moses Brady, the head man of the farmers. I've a notion he'd make a prime sheriff, and it would help get all the factions hereabouts together. And I figure young Val Carver would make a good chief deputy."

Wagner looked startled, and for a moment resentful. Then he chuckled.

"Hatfield," he said, "I believe you've got somethin' there. You've done convinced me that our row with the farmers is all darn foolishness. And I reckon I can swing the rest of the boys to my way of thinkin'. It's about time to head for home. Suppose we ride on across the crik and have a talk with Brady."

An astonished man was Moses Brady when Hatfield and Gordon Wagner rode up to his farm house. At first he was hesi-

tant, but finally agreed to accept the appointment.

"Won't have any trouble fixin' it with the commissioners," Wagner assured him. "And there's somethin' else I want to talk with you about. Us fellers have got to get together. The cowmen can use the stuff you fellers raise over here. That forage will come in mighty handy in the winter time. No sense in shippin' it out of the section. And you'll need more land to raise all we'll need. That strip east of the crik will grow stuff fine. I'll lease it to you at your own terms. Also, you ought to have modern machinery. I got some spare cash I'll advance for proper equipment. . . . Oh, shut up, I ain't doin' nobody a favor. I'm just makin' a plumb good investment. We're goin' to make this section the best in Texas. Shake on it, Brady."

The two old men shook hands, smiling into each other's eyes. Jim Hatfield also smiled, for he was decidedly pleased with the way everything had worked out.

He rode west the following morning. His eyes were sunny as summer seas and he was in a very complacent frame of mind. He had come into a section torn by strife, turmoil and hatreds. He was leaving it peaceful, contented, looking to the future. With the rising sun a golden flame behind him, he rode on, an expression of pleasant anticipation on his sternly handsome face, to where danger and new adventure waited.

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NEXT ISSUE

THE RIMROCK RAIDERS

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By JACKSON COLE

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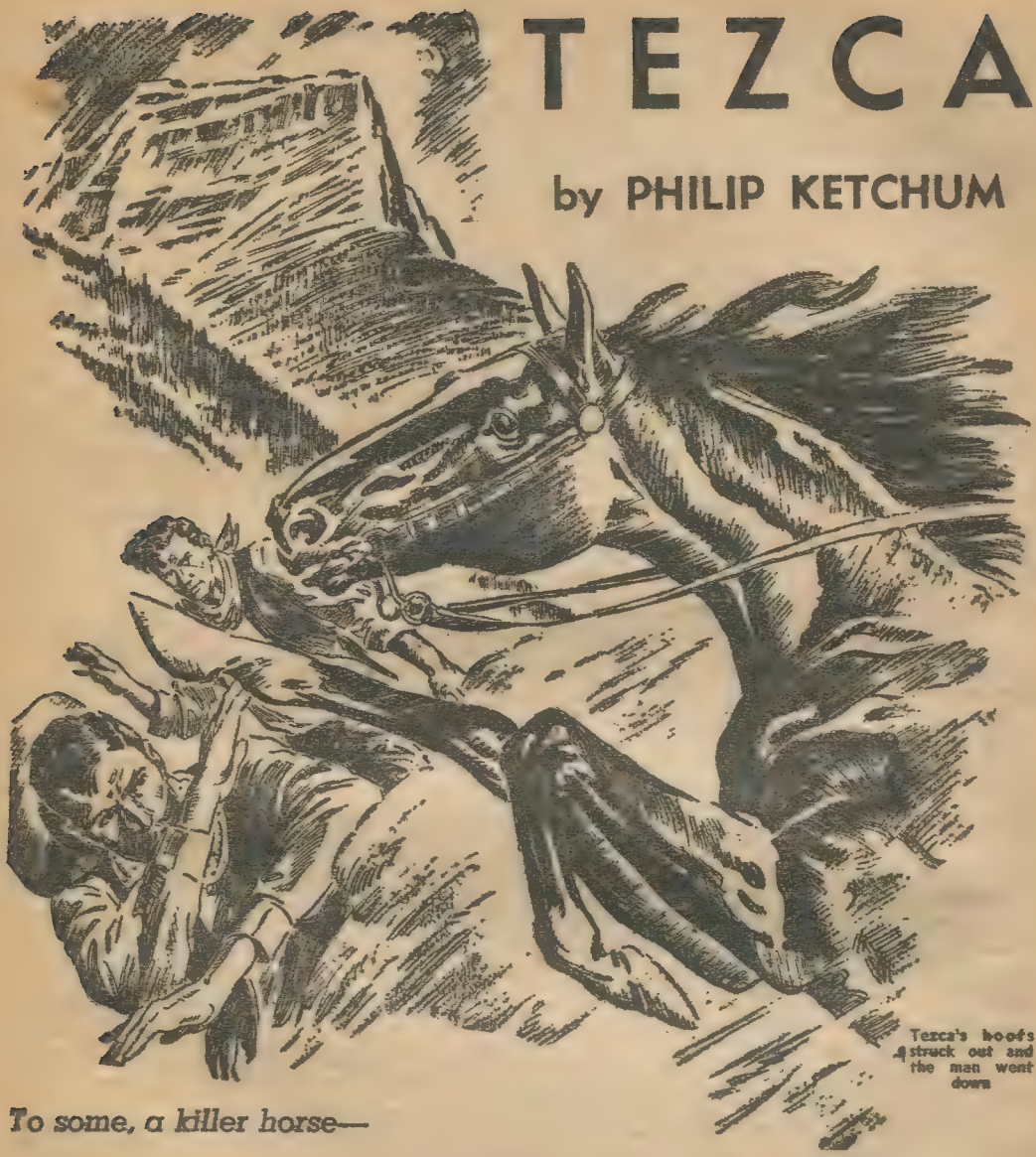
TEZCA

by PHILIP KETCHUM



Tezca's hoofs struck out and the man went down

To some, a killer horse—

to Ramon Martinez, a loyal friend!

IF, IN your wanderings, you are one of those who has visited the Camarillo country you have probably heard the story of Tezcatlipoca, the black Arabian stallion who was as swift as the wind-god for whom he was named.

His story has become one of legends, one of the folk-tales of the old south-west. It is a part of the treasury of memories of the gray-beards who came to these high, storm-swept plateaus when they were young men and when life was a rugged and a precarious adventure.

It is an echo of the early days when a man's wealth was measured by his strength, by his ability and by his spirit of independence rather than in dollars and cents. It is a page from the youth of a

country now growing old. How much truth there is in it I do not know. Perhaps in the telling and re-telling many things have been added but those who know the story best swear that this is not so. They will tell you that. . . .

There was trouble ahead for those living in the Camarillo Country, serious trouble. It had been building up over a number of years. There had probably been a time in the past when a peaceful solution might have been found, but there was no chance of this any more.

Webber Crosley, who ran the Bar Anchor ranch south of the river, was hiring gun-fighters. Bill Huggins, whose Spade ranch was north of the river, was hiring gun-fighters. There had already been several clashes between these two groups.

A range war was in the making. Another incident, most men knew, would touch it off. The town of Camarillo had become almost an armed camp, with the two factions each waiting for the other to make an open break. Only a miracle could intervene.

It was at this time, when men's nerves and patience was stretched to the breaking point, that young Ramon Martinez returned home from a year's trip to Mexico. Few around Camarillo had ever paid much attention to Ramon, who was just another son of old Juan Martinez, the saddlemaker.

The chances are that few would have paid any attention to him today if it had not been for the horse he was riding. It was a black stallion, sixteen hands high. It was obviously of Arabian stock. It had the thick mane of the Arabian, the long, heavy tail, the pointed nose, the proud, erect carriage.

THERE were more than the normal number of people in Camarillo this morning. Webber Crosley was there with a dozen of his hired killers. Bill Huggins was there with a crowd of his own. The situation was tense. One of Crosley's men had been arrested by the sheriff. Crosley had come to town to get him out of jail. Huggins was in town to back up the sheriff, if necessary. Anything could happen.

Ramon was wholly unaware of this as he pulled up at the watering trough at the south end of the town square. He was anxious to ride on home. He was anxious to see Juana Trujillo again. Someday, he and Juana were to be married. He sat easily on the stallion's back, glancing from side to side. There was a pride in his bearing which was understandable. Here was a horse. Here were twelve hundred pounds of harnessed dynamite. No man, anywhere, owned a finer mount.

A crowd was quick to gather around him and for a moment the tensions eased. These men loved horses. They knew a real horse when they saw one and they were seeing one this morning. Webber Crosley pushed into the crowd. He pushed forward until he stood in the front row.

"Yours?" he asked, looking up at Ramon.

Ramon nodded.

"What do you call him?"

"His name is Tezcatlipoca," said Ramon. "I call him Tezca, for short."

"Tezca, huh?" said Crosley. "Not a bad name. It's not a bad horse, either. I'll give you a hundred dollars for him."

"Tezca is not for sale," Ramon answered.

Bill Huggins had joined the crowd and had heard all this. "Two hundred," he offered.

Crosley's lips tightened. He threw an ugly look at Bill Huggins. "Two, fifty," he snapped.

"Two, seventy five," said Bill Huggins.

The others in the crowd had moved back, leaving these two standing alone, facing each other. The tensions had returned. Both men were scowling.

"Three hundred," Crosley grated, and there was an ugly warning in the sound of his voice. "Three hundred, and you keep out of this, Huggins."

Ramon leaned forward. "Senores," he called. "Senores, as I told you, Tezca is not for sale. He is not for sale at any price."

It is doubtful that either Crosley or Huggins heard him. All the bitterness they had felt toward each other had come to a sudden concentration. Both were rigid.

"Three, ten," said Huggins.

Crosley grabbed for his gun. He jerked it up, thumbing back the hammer. He fired, and his bullet caught Bill Huggins high in the chest.

Huggins took a step forward. His knees caved in. He fell to the ground. There was no sound or movement from the crowd. Ramon was bewildered, frightened. He could feel the tremor which was running through Tezca's body. He smoothed his hand along the stallion's neck.

"Steady, Tezca," he whispered. "Steady. There is nothing to fear. Ramon will protect you."

Crosley had turned to face him again. "I'll pay three, ten," Crosley said harshly. "In fact, I'll make it three, fifteen."

Those were his last words. Bill Huggins lay on his side. He was near death but he had enough strength to lift his gun and fire one shot. It struck Webber Crosley in the temple.

IT WAS this that marked the end of the threatened range war. It marked the end of the Spade and the Bar Anchor ranches which were cut up and sold by the respective heirs. It served as Tezca's introduction to the Camarillo country.

Tezca was the horse for which two men had fought and died, and in so doing had probably saved a dozen other lives. A fabulous price, fabulous in those days, had been offered for the stallion, and had been refused. This, in itself, was enough to set Tezca in a class of his own. Other events secured him this distinction.

Back in the Quemado hills was the stronghold of a colorful bandit who called himself El Muerte. His real name was Sam Evans. He was wanted by half of the sheriffs west of the Pecos. He, and those who rode with him, had tried their hand at everything from rustling to train robbery.

Only a month before in the hold-up of the Cartersville bank, three men who stood in their way had been shot to death. The record El Muerte and his men had blasted out for themselves was as blood-stained as that of any band of outlaws in the entire history of the border.

El Muerte, at this time, was a man in the early forties. He was tall, slender, wiry, a man with a violent temper. He was lightning swift with his gun. He was a good horseman. He boasted that he could ride anything on four feet.

Under the name of Chick Hughes he had come to the Camarillo rodeo the year before and had ridden Sun-dance, a horse which no man before him had ever been able to ride.

El Muerte had a dozen fine horses in his hidden camp in the hills but the moment he heard of Tezca he decided to add one more to his string. The fact that Tezca was not for sale didn't bother him. El Muerte always took what he wanted.

With half a dozen of his men, El Muerte came down from the hills one night. Ramon, his father, and his older brothers, were overpowered and were bound and gagged. Tezca was roped and was led from the stable. He put up no fight at all. He seemed to go along willingly as El Muerte and his men started back for the hills.

It had been after midnight when they left Camarillo. Dawn found them in a high, wide valley, not much more than twenty-five miles away. They made a brief stop for breakfast and while food was being prepared, El Muerte took his first good look at his prize.

Never had he seen a finer stallion. There was speed in every line of Tezca's sleek body. There was endurance in the thick upper muscles of his legs. Here, finally, was a horse to match a man of El Muerte's calibre. No sheriff's posse could ever outrun or outlast Tezca. El Muerte could not wait to try him out.

"Saddle him," he ordered. "I'll ride him on into camp."

"Maybe you ought to wait until we get there, chief," said one of his men.

El Muerte shook his head. "Saddle him. I'll ride him now."

Tezca stood quietly while a saddle was placed on his back and while he was bridled. He stood without moving while El Muerte climbed aboard. A tremor ran through his body. He felt the sudden cut of the barbed, ring-bit in his mouth as El Muerte hauled back on the reins. He felt the sharp jab of spurs. He reared into the air, twisting his body to the side. A man standing too near him tried to get out of the way of his slashing hoofs, but was not in time.

TEZCA came down on stiff fore-legs. He reared into the air again. He swapped ends. He crow-hopped. He sunfished. One of El Muerte's men made a quick jump for the bridle. Tezca swerved and again lashed out with his hoofs. There was a scream as the man went down.

To one side were three more men. Tezca plunged toward them. El Muerte was hauling back on the reins. The barbed, ring-bit cut deep into the roof of Tzca's mouth but he didn't turn. The men scattered. Tezca, plunging straight ahead overtook one of them. His hoofs struck out once more and the man went down.

Tezca kept running. He was running now with the swiftness of the wind. After a mile of this he stopped. He stopped so suddenly that no living man could have taken the jolt. El Muerte left the saddle. He half turned in the air. He struck the ground almost head first. He didn't move again.

The sheriff's posse, reaching this point in the hills just before noon, found four dead outlaws. How they had died was clearly evident, yet hard to believe. Men trained in reading signs studied the ground carefully. They reported their conclusions to the sheriff.

"Tezca ought to be decorated," said the sheriff. "He's done what no lawman has been able to do. There will be none to grieve over the death of men like these. But at the same time—"

Others in the posse nodded. They knew what the sheriff had left unsaid. Tezca was a killer. A horse which was a killer could never be trusted. At any time he might turn on a man. Tezca would have to be destroyed.

"Maybe he's up there in the hills," someone suggested. "Maybe by this time he's joined up with the wild horses."

Others nodded. None would have relished the job of destroying a horse like Tezca.

They returned to Camarillo and the sheriff sent for Ramon. He told Ramon what they had found. "Tezca," he reported, "probably kept right on going. I'm sorry, Ramon. He was a wonderful horse."

"He still is," said Ramon.

The sheriff blinked. "You mean he's back?"

"Look through the window," Ramon suggested.

The sheriff looked through the window. Tezca stood quietly in the street outside. Perched in his saddle was Maria Martinez, Ramon's three year old sister.

"That horse is a killer," said the sheriff almost breathlessly. "You had better get Maria away from him."

"You," said Ramon, "would kill an outlaw. What more did Tezca do?"

"He is a horse," snapped the sheriff. "He has no understanding of right or wrong. He is a killer. I tell you Maria is not safe on his back."

Ramon chuckled. He stepped to the door. He opened it. "Tezca," he called. "Take Maria around the square." He motioned with his arm.

Tezca started around the square. He moved slowly, carefully, almost as though he understood how precious was the burden on his back.

"Sheriff," said Ramon, "you could ride Tezca safely around the square if I said nothing, yet if I told Tezca to pitch you from the saddle he would do so. Shall we make the test?"

The sheriff scowled. He shook his head. He looked curiously at Ramon. There was no law which said that a man could not keep a vicious horse so long as it injured no one. There were none to press the charges which might have been brought by the outlaws.

"All right, Ramon," he nodded. "Keep your horse but keep him where he will harm no one. That's an order."

RAMON went to work for Charlie Dalton on the Star D ranch. He took Tezca with him. He hadn't wanted to do this. He had wanted to marry Juana and go to work in town, but he took the sheriff's warning seriously. On a ranch, he decided, Tezca would be safer than in town.

The first week he was there, a herd which had been rounded up for a drive to Ludlow, broke into a stampede. Others helped, but men gave credit to Tezca for the quick milling of the herd.

The next week Tezca won a match race with Sun-up, a stallion which had never before been beaten. A few days after this, Tezca pulled Dalton's prize Angus bull from the quicksands into which he had blundered. The Angus weighed more than two thousand pounds.

These stories drifted back to Camarillo and there were more. There was the story of Tezca's trip through a raging blizzard when he carried Ramon and two other men to safety. There was the story of the time Tezca leapt the Narrows. There was the story of the night he jumped the corral fence and kicked open the bunkhouse

door. Those he aroused discovered the barn was on fire. They were able to extinguish the blaze before it had caused much damage.

Then, after all this, there was a different story which Charlie Dalton had to tell. He told it to the sheriff. Tezca had killed another man, a man named John Evans. His hoofs had stomped Evans to death.

"We locked Tezca in the barn," said Dalton. "He was gentle enough after it was all over. We talked to Ramon. We told him that Tezca was a killer and would have to be destroyed. He begged us to let Tezca go. He promised to take the stallion away. I was wrong in letting Ramon bring Tezca to the ranch. A horse that proves itself to be a killer has to be destroyed. You know that, sheriff."

The sheriff nodded.

"I asked Ed Hargrove to handle it," Dalton continued. "We let Ramon go into the barn to tell Tezca goodby. He came out and a moment later Tezca kicked his way through the side wall where the boards had been half burned away by the fire. Hargrove leveled his gun at Tezca, but before he could fire, Ramon shot him. Then Ramon covered the rest of us until Tezca got away."

"Where is Ramon?" asked the sheriff.

"Outside in the wagon, tied up."

"Bring him in. How badly was Hargrove hurt?"

"He was not hurt seriously. And don't blame Ramon too much, sheriff. He loved that horse. I know how he felt."

"I do too," said the sheriff. "Tezca was a great horse."

Ramon was brought into the sheriff's office. He was tearful, but defiant.

"Evans was trying to kill Tezca," he insisted. "He went after Tezca with an iron bar. He told me to keep out of it. He said he was going to beat some respect into Tezca's head."

The sheriff looked at Dalton. "That may be true," Dalton admitted. "None of us but Ramon saw what happened. Evans was a sour, bitter man. Most of us have ridden Tezca. Evans tried it once. He raked Tezca with his spurs and was thrown. Perhaps Evans deserved what he got, but that alters nothing. A horse which kills, cannot be trusted."

This was an axiom of the range. The sheriff nodded. "You'll have to stay here in jail for a while, Ramon," he said slowly. "Maybe Charlie Dalton and Hargrove will be easy on you. We'll see."

"And Tezca?" Ramon asked.

"Tezca," said the sheriff, "must be destroyed. A killer horse is a menace to any horse on the range. He can become more vicious than a wolf. Ask your father. Ask anyone."

Tears flooded Ramon's eyes. He buried his face in his hands.

LATER Ramon's father came to the jail to see him. Juana Trujillo, came to the jail to see him. Ramon talked to them of Tezca. He seemed able to talk of nothing else.

"They have not found him," said Ramon's father, "but soon they will. And what they will do, must be done."

Ramon bit his lips. He turned away. He did not even hear what Juana tried to whisper to him.

Late that night there was a sound at his barred window. Ramon stepped that way. The window was high and was open for ventilation. He could hear someone outside.

"Ramon," called a hushed voice, Juana's voice. "We are waiting, Tezca and I. Are you ready? Can you climb to the window?"

"Easily," said Ramon, "but it is barred."

"It will not be barred for long," said Juana.

There was a sudden, rending sound as the bars were ripped away. Ramon climbed to the window. He climbed through it. He dropped to the ground outside. Juana joined him. She was leading Tezca and was recoiling the rope which had been tied to the bars of the window. Tezca, who had come back to Camarillo and whom Juana had hidden in the Trujillo barn, had pulled the bars away. Tezca now pushed his nose against Ramon and whinnied.

"Come, Ramon," said Juan Trujillo. "You must hurry."

"Where?" asked Ramon.

"South. North. In any direction you wish. It's a big world."

"And you, Juana?"

"I would like to go with you."

Ramon climbed into the saddle. He helped Juana up behind him. He leaned forward. "You pick the direction, Tezca,"

(Concluded on page 90)

LOCO LAWMAN

By TEX HOLT

Old Sheriff Yokum of Lizard Gulp is crazy-like a fox!

The sheriff snatched out his gun and fired

BEING Sheriff Jasper Yokum's one and only deputy like I am is sure hard on the disposition. The main trouble is that the sheriff is in his middle seventies and his first or second childhood. Whatever I figure on him doing next he seldom does, and sometimes the results are wondrous to behold. He also has frequent lapses of memory which makes the confusion more binding.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Your Honor," Sheriff Yokum said when I stepped into the office this morning. "On behalf of my fellow citizens permit me to welcome you to the thriving town of Lizard Gulp, in beautiful Frog Whistle county."

"Who am I now?" I asked resignedly, just as if I didn't know my name was Roy Bunker, that I was thirty years younger than the sheriff, and an ex-cowhand should have known better than to take a job like this one. "Not Napoleon again!"

"Don't you know who you are, Governor?" Yokum stroked his shaggy gray mustache and looked at me in surprise. "This is serious, Your Honor. Governor Hasty Hardy suffering a pure case of amweazels."

"A pure case of what?" I demanded, dropping into a chair.

"Of short-sneezes," said the sheriff. "Your mind is a complete blank—you can't remember who you are."

"Oh," I said. "You mean that I'm suffering from amnesia, Sheriff."

"Right." Yokum nodded. "Just what I said." He shook his head sadly. "There's bad news today! Think of the confusion in the vast state of Texas when the people learn the Governor has lost his memory."

"They'll be confused all right," I said. "Hasty Hardy is the Governor of Arizona."

"What's all this talk about the Governor, Roy?" the sheriff asked, and I would have sworn there was a twinkle in his old blue eyes. I never have been able to figure out whether he really has those lapses of memory or just pretends in order to confuse me. "I wasn't listening. Have you been talking nonsense again?"

There didn't seem much point in arguing about it. I tried that once and by the time I got through I was convinced we were both crazy.

"Never mind," I said. "We've got something more important than that to worry about, Sheriff. Just heard from the driver of the west bound stage when it passed through here early this morning. He says that Latigo Ash has escaped from prison."

SHERIFF Yokum's bushy white eyebrows went up in surprise.

"Latigo Ash!" exclaimed the sheriff. "The lone bandit we captured and dug up enough evidence on to have him sent to prison for life a year ago." Yokum

frowned. "He swore if he ever got loose he would come back and kill us both, Roy."

"Uh-huh." I grinned. The old sheriff might be slightly cracked at times but I sure never claimed there was anything wrong with his nerve or courage. "I don't see you shaking in your boots."

"All the same Ash may come back this way," Yokum said thoughtfully. "And I always did say in time of danger prepare for trouble. What we need are some field mice."

"Field mice?" I said. "What for? To help Governor Hasty Hardy regain his memory?"

"Of course not," said the sheriff. "That was in Texas and this is Arizona. We need the field mice to help us capture Latigo Ash. Wonder why he picked a name like that? It sounds like a cigar."

"Sure," I said. "A cigar that is likely to blow up in our faces. But I still want to know about the field mice. How can they help us capture Ash?"

"Simple," said the sheriff. "We get three or four field mice sneak up and drop them down inside Latigo Ash's shirt. Those mice will tickle him so much that he won't be able to shoot and we can capture him easily."

"Except Ash wouldn't let us get near enough to drop the mice down his neck," I said. "He would fill us full of lead."

"That's the trouble with you young folks, always spoiling the fun," Sheriff Jasper Yokum said resignedly. "How about elephants? No, I guess that isn't such a good idea. Of course we might try—"

I never did learn what he thought we might try then. A stranger had ridden up the street in considerable hurry, and halted his horse in front of the sheriff's office.

"The Overland was held up and robbed three miles north of this town," he shouted as the sheriff and I rushed to the door. "The bandits killed the driver, the guard and six passengers."

"Wholesale slaughter," said the sheriff. "That's not cricket."

"No, Sheriff," I said pleadingly. "Not the locust fever again. This is no time for anything like that. There is work to be done."

Sheriff Yokum glared at the stranger, and the man on the bay horse glared right back at him.

"Where were you on the night of June sixteenth?" demanded the sheriff. "I mean where were you when the stage was held up?"

"What year?" Apparently the stranger believed in answering first questions first. He had mean eyes, and I didn't like him whatever. "Be specific."

"Leave the Pacific and the Atlantic out of this," stated Jasper Yokum firmly. "Who are you and where were you when the stage was robbed?"

"I'm Matt Blair," said the stranger. "I must have been six miles north of here when the stage was held up. When I reached it the Overland was standing at the side of the road. The driver, the guard and the eight passengers were all lying around dead, like I said before. But why don't you do something about it, Sheriff? What's the sense of just standing here talking to me?"

"That's right!" The old lawman glared at me. "What are you doing about this, Roy Bunker?"

"Why I—" I began.

"Never mind excuses," interrupted the sheriff. "Round up a posse. No, on second thought, never mind the posse. We'll take care of this ourselves. A bird in hand is worth two."

"Two what?" I asked.

Matt Blair swung out of the saddle. All of a sudden Sheriff Yokum covered the big stranger with his gun.

"You're under arrest of course, Blair," said the sheriff.

"Arrest?" Blair glared at Yokum. "That's not the way— I mean what for?"

"For your own safety as a material witness," said the sheriff. "Since you recognized all ten of the bandits they are likely to down you on sight."

A NASTY scowl darkened Blair's face as he glared at the sheriff.

"Recognize them, I didn't see any of those four men," Blair protested. "You can't lock me up."

"That's a matter of opinion in which the majority rules," I said, also covering the stranger with my gun. It had dawned on me that the sheriff knew exactly what he was doing, and I had better go right along with him. "We have an excellent jail, comfortable, sanitary bunks, north light,

delightful view of the river, and your horse will also be given food and lodging."

When he found we really meant to hold him in jail as a material witness, Matt Blair uttered a number of pungent words that I doubted he had learned at his mother's knee. But he was convinced he had better do as we said when the sheriff just nicked the bottom of the prisoner's left ear with a .45 bullet. After which Matt Blair willingly permitted us to lock him up in the jail in back of the sheriff's office.

"You're both plumb loco," he said, when the cell door had been locked. "Maybe I am safer here at that."

Neither the sheriff nor I felt the remark was worthy of comment, so we departed in silence. When we got back in the office Sheriff Yokum calmly seated himself at his desk as though intending to remain there.

"Hadn't we better ride out and see about the stage holdup?" I asked.

"What time is it?" demanded the sheriff, staring at the clock ticking on the wall."

"Nine-thirty A. M." I said. "Why?"

"And what time does the south bound Overland usually arrive in Lizard's Gulp?" Yokum asked. "I'll tell you around six or seven in the evening. Why should it have been heading here at this time of day? And the first time Blair told us the driver and guard and six passengers had been killed—the second time there were eight passengers."

"He also said he hadn't seen any of those four men when you suggested he had recognized the bandits," I said, shaking my head sadly. "I'm afraid that our friend Matt is an awful liar. But why, Sheriff?"

"Expediency makes the best horsemanship," said the sheriff. "We are supposed to round up a posse of the best men in town, and go dashing to the scene of the stage holdup—and that would be a mistake."

"Why?" I asked.

"This is the first of the month," said Yokum. "The time that most of the ranchers around here pay their men. The bank has quite a lot of cash on hand. With us out of town with a posse, even a lone bandit might succeed in robbing the bank."

"Such as an outlaw named Latigo Ash," I said thoughtfully.

"Exactly," said the sheriff.

From down the street in the direction of the bank came the rattle of gunfire. I leaped to the open door of the office and the sheriff was right behind me. We were just in time to see a masked man dash out of the bank a gun in one hand and a couple of money bags in the other.

I drew my gun and fired with more haste than accuracy. The bullet missed the masked man by a good ten feet. He quickly tied the money bags to his saddle and then mounted his horse.

"There he goes!" shouted the sheriff, who was in one of his more excited moods. "Help, murder, police! Fireman save my child!"

He fired and his aim was even worse than mine had been. His bullet broke the glass in a window of a building across the street.

The bank robber rode away fast, heading toward the north end of the town. Someone took a shot at him from a doorway. He returned the fire and the man in the doorway ducked back out of sight. A few moments later the bandit was out of six-gun range, and fading into the distance.

"Get the horses, Roy," commanded the sheriff. "We're trailing that hombre."

"Oh, sure," I said. "It hasn't rained for three weeks, the ground is so hard-packed that you couldn't see a hoofmark to save your neck, and we are going to trail him without any trouble."

All the same we quickly saddled our horses and started after the bank robber. Some of the local citizens were all for joining us, but the sheriff waved them back.

"Less chance of his spotting two men than a whole bunch," called Yokum. "We'll get him! Figure on bringing him in by sun-down."

THIS struck me as the high water mark of optimism, but we just might be lucky. If we did find the bank robber I planned to make up for the bad shooting I did in town.

Along with my six-gun I had a carbine in my saddle-boot.

"Where would you head for if you had just robbed the bank, Roy?" asked the sheriff as we rode on north along the road, leaving the town behind us. "It is my

opinion that a quick cricket gathers no moss."

"Reckon I would try to get as far away as possible as quickly as I could make it," I said, ignoring the crickets.

"And wear your horse out needlessly before you were even sure of pursuit?" said the sheriff. "If the bandit is Latigo Ash, then he is too experienced to do anything that foolish." Yokum frowned thoughtfully. "Let's see—three miles north-east—rocky, mountain country—cave in the cliff—that's it. Excellent thinking, Yokum. How do you do it?"

I knew a short question would bring a long answer so I remained silent. When the sheriff got to talking to himself like that he usually worked out some plan of action that brought results. Sometimes good and sometimes bad—but either way it got results.

We rode on north along the road for over three miles. There was no sign of any stage coach holdup at about the place where Matt Blair said it had occurred. The sheriff grinned as he looked around.

"All those dear departed who Blair told us about have sure departed," Yokum said. "Figured he was scattering corpses around too regardless to be telling the truth."

We rode on a little further, and then turned off the road, heading north-east into a stretch of wild, rocky country. We reached the mouth of a canyon and dismounted and left our horses ground-hitched. I took the carbine along as we went on into the canyon on foot.

"There's a cave up there on Frog Whistle Cliff, Roy," said the sheriff, waving toward a narrow opening up on a ledge. "Climb up and see if Ash hasn't been using the cave for a hideout." Yokum smiled. "I'll stay down here seeing as you are young and agile, and I'm young and fragile."

It wasn't much of a climb, so I went up and reached the ledge, still carrying my carbine. The cave was empty all right, but I could see that someone had camped there recently. The ashes of a dead fire, and empty tin cans, told me that.

"Somebody was here all right," I shouted down to the sheriff, as I stepped to the edge of the ledge. "I—"

I broke off, startled, as I saw the masked man who was advancing behind the old lawman. I didn't dare yell to Yokum and tell him the bandit was behind him, for that might make the outlaw shoot the sheriff in the back.

All of a sudden the sheriff apparently went crazy. He snatched out his gun and fired a shot at me that came so close that I fell over backward, the carbine in my hands going off and sending a bullet into the air.

The masked man was so startled at the sheriff's actions that he just stood there in open mouthed amazement. Yokum swung around and shot the bank robber in the right shoulder before the man could even use his gun. I scrambled to my feet just in time to see what had happened. Then I hurried back down off the ledge.

The bank robber was Latigo Ash, all right. We learned that when we took off the mask. Later when we got him back to town and had a doctor take care of the shoulder wound, Ash admitted that Blair was working with him. The stage robbery yarn had been intended to get us out of town so that Ash could rob the bank, but when he had seen that didn't work he had gone through with the robbery anyway.

"Which just goes to prove what I have always said," stated the sheriff. "It is a long road that gathers no moss." He frowned and glanced at me. "Does that make sense to you, Roy?"

"No," I said firmly.

"Me neither," said Sheriff Yokum. "Let's go have a drink."

"Now you're talking," I said.

Coming Next Issue: AVENGER OF THE CHAPARRAL, the true story of a Famous Texas Ranger by HAROLD PREECE

By LEE BOND

Long Sam covered the three outlaws

LONG SAM TAKES A JOB

THE HOUSE was old, and seemed to have been deserted for many years. It sat on a bench under a low promontory, facing a valley where an old road showed faintly under giant, moss-hung liveoaks. Along a narrow but deep bayou that lay along the valley floor, tupelo and cypress pushed stately crowns high above the more sprawling oaks. Pine timber made a black-green covering over the ridges that hemmed in the valley, giving the place a secluded, hidden-away feel. At least Long Sam Littlejohn thought of it that way, and imagined that many people would have considered the place depressingly lonely.

Outlaw Littlejohn tries his hand at cattle herding!

But it was not at all depressing or lonely to Long Sam. Outlawed, with a sizable cash reward offered for his dead-or-alive capture, it was rare that he came upon any spot north of the Rio Grande where he could actually relax. Yet he had found peace here in the lonely valley. He had been camped in the old house for almost three weeks, and no other human being had come within sight or hearing in that time. He was considerably jolted, therefore, when the buckboard hove into view.

Long Sam had been sitting on the stone steps, smoke-colored eyes drinking in the beauty of the Texas morning. The moment the buckboard came into view he shot to his feet so fast the flat-crowned black Stetson almost tumbled off his yellow-thatched head.

"Joe Fry?" Long Sam whispered the name.

Joe Fry was a deputy U. S. marshal, who worked out of Austin. He was a stocky, sandy-haired man, with cold gray eyes and the blunt-jawed face of a born scrapper. The man driving the buckboard was stocky, thick chested. Joe Fry wore tailored suits, button shoes and derby hat. Generally he had part of a cigar jutting from a corner of his thin-lipped mouth. The man driving the buckboard had on a neat gray suit, and there was a cigar clamped in his jaw. The hat he wore was small but not a derby.

"Shucks, I'd better simmer down!" Long Sam said aloud. "The gent driving that buckboard is sure about Joe Fry's size and build. Only that isn't Fry."

THE GAUNT outlaw glanced east across the valley. Sleeper, his big, knobby roan horse stood in a little meadow down there, jug-head up, crimpy ears cocked toward the slowly moving buckboard. Long Sam looked back at the two men and the buckboard, absently fondling black-butted six-shooters that were holstered low on his bony thighs.

"Tubby gent beside that thick-chested driver looks pretty young," he mused.

The buckboard came on along the old road and into what had once been a yard, the two men looking steadily at Long Sam, who stood there on the steps, his great height, black clothing and low-slung guns on belts sparkling with brass cartridges giving him a sinister look of which he was totally unaware.

"Morning, gents," Long Sam greeted pleasantly. "Out for a hunt?"

"All we're hunting is this ranch, which happens to be mine!" the fat youth said testily.

"I've been camped here for a while," Long Sam said quietly. "If you've got objections, I'll gather my stuff and sift."

"Gather and sift!" the fat boy sneered.

The buckboard springs groaned as if relieved when he stepped down to the ground, thick mouth curling in a sneer as he laid a hand on the pearl grips of a nickel-plated gun holstered high on his waist.

"Maybe you didn't hear me the first time, feller!" he yapped at Long Sam. "I'm Matt Holden. I inherited this ranch from my daddy when he died, five years back. Get your junk together, and get off this land!"

Long Sam was not even looking at the mouthy young fellow. He was watching the man who had driven the rig. The fellow was neatly dressed, and had a pair of blue-gray eyes that were shrewd and calculating. He was graying at the temples but was not an old man. About him was an air of quiet authority. The man's stiff-lipped silence, and the boring impact of those cold eyes had the outlaw's nerves going crawley.

"Don't let Matt's talk worry you," the older man said drily. "He drank rotgut whisky all night, and hasn't had any sleep. I'm Arthur Logan. I bought the Commerce Bank, down at Saddle Rock, a year ago. Matt wants to sell this ranch, and I thought I might take it on as a personal investment."

"Howdy, Logan." Long Sam nodded. "I haven't been in Saddle Rock for almost two years, so I didn't know old Jim Fullbright had sold his Commerce Bank. Fred Tull still sheriff down there?"

"Tull is still sheriff," Arthur Logan said, and something in the man's voice told Long Sam that he did not like lanky, white-haired old Fred Tull any too well.

"Cut out the gabbling, you two!" Matt Holden spoke up sharply. "And you, Slim, get your stuff and clear out of here."

Matt Holden waddled off around the house, glaring up at Long Sam. The gaunt outlaw looked back at Arthur Logan, who had stepped out of the buckboard and was

knotting the lines to a front wheel.

"Pay no attention to Matt's talk," he said quietly. "If I buy the place, I'll pay you wages to stay and tend cattle I'll be sending out."

"You're offering me a job?" Long Sam asked, surprised.

"I'm offering you a job," Logan answered, and nodded.

Long Sam did not attempt an answer for a few moments. He felt odd inside. Certainly it was rare that anyone offered him honest work. Then he remembered that it was also rare that he found a place like this lonely valley, where he could live in peace. He suddenly felt good, and tried to convince himself that the hard, boring quality in Arthur Logan's shrewd eyes was simply part of the man's personality.

"Between you and I—er—Slim, I've been on this ranch before, hunting deer and turkey," Logan went on smoothly. "Young Holden is asking a reasonable price, so I've already made up my mind to take the place. Will you stay here and work for me?"

LONG Sam frowned, the feeling of happiness he had known moments earlier slipping away from him. Logan's boring eyes, and his slightly tense manner had the gaunt outlaw uneasy. The fact that he had adopted the "Slim" handle surly young Matt Holden had hung on him also struck Long Sam as peculiar. Had banker Arthur Holden been scanning those huge "Wanted" posters Joe Fry was eternally nailing up around the country? Those posters bore Long Sam's picture, description, and a list of crimes he was supposed to have committed!

"What kind of work would I be expected to do, Logan?" the outlaw asked warily.

"Cattle work," the banker grunted. "I have almost three hundred head, grazing on leased range. Give me your word that you'll be here to look after them, and I'll have the cattle driven up in a day or two."

"You wouldn't just up and hire a man you know nothing about," Long Sam said bluntly. "Slide the joker out where I can see it."

"Confound you!" Logan burst out. "I want you here because the looks of you, and the way you wear those guns on your hips, makes me believe you'd be able to protect my property."

"That's better!" Long Sam cocked a yellow eyebrow. "While I consider it no compliment to be told that I look like a gun-slinger, I think you're talking straighter than you have been. But why do you think you might need a gunman up here to watch over your cattle?"

"Did you ever hear of a bandit named Pig Yount?" the banker asked harshly.

Long Sam felt as if someone had shoved a handful of cracked ice down the back of his collar. He looked at the scowling banker for a long moment, trying to read the hard eyes.

"It happens I do know that overfed Yount by sight as well as by reputation," the gaunt outlaw said finally.

"And his men?" Logan's voice rasped.

"I know Yount's men," Long Sam nodded. "Buck Conlan, Pig Yount's right bower, is a black haired, black eyed devil nearly as tall as me. Sperry Millard is a medium-built, sandy-haired feller who looks and acts as mild as milk, but is said to be the fastest and deadliest shot of the bunch. Ott Shinn, a rangy, loose-jointed redhead who looks dumb and clumsy but is neither, and a dark, wiry little cuss named Pawnee Carter, make up the rest of the Yount gang."

"You obviously know Yount and his men!" Arthur Logan said hoarsely.

"You seem to know them, too," Long Sam pointed out.

"I should!" the banker gritted. "I owned the only bank in a Kansas town that boomed when you Texans came rolling to our new railroad with your herds of cattle. Three years ago, five men walked into that bank of mine at high noon, one day. They murdered my cashier in cold blood, then gutted the tills and vault."

"Those bandits were Pig Yount and his bunch?" Long Sam prompted.

"The bandits were Pig Yount and his four men," Logan declared. "I was at home, having dinner with my wife and daughter, when we heard the commotion. I ran to the door, saw five men mounting in front of the bank and shooting at townsmen. I got a Sharps rifle I had used on game. As the bandits spurred along the street, I picked the biggest target among them, elevated the gun muzzle in the hope of making the ball carry the great dis-

tance, and fired just one shot. The huge man I had targeted on fell forward over his saddle pommel, and would have hit the ground if two of his companions had not raced in and kept him in the saddle."

"You shot Pig Yount?" Long Sam asked sharply.

"I shot Pig Yount!" Arthur Logan snapped. "Here, take a look at this."

FROM a vest pocket he lifted a dully glinting object. Long Sam took it, smoky eyes wide as he saw that it was a huge bullet that had obviously gone through a gun barrel.

"Looks like a fifty-caliber slug," the gaunt outlaw commented.

"That's exactly what it is," Logan said sharply. "That's the bullet I fired into Pig Yount, three years ago."

"How the devil would you know this is the bullet you put into Yount's hide?" the gaunt outlaw countered, handing the slug back to the banker.

"I got the thing through the mail four weeks ago, addressed to me at Saddle Rock!" Logan replied. "There was a note in the pill box the bullet came in. The note said 'Three years ago you put this in my keeping, Mr. Logan. I have taken good care of the property, and shall call at your bank, some day, to collect what I feel that you owe me.' The note was unsigned, of course."

"I'll be dogged!" Long Sam scowled. "Did you show Fred Tull that slug and the note that came with it, and tell him about your trouble with Yount, up in Kansas?"

"I went immediately to the sheriff!" Arthur Logan said angrily. "The old fossil only laughed at me."

"Hanged if I understand old Fred's attitude," Long Sam said gravely. "By sending you that bullet and the note sayin' he aimed to come to your bank to collect what he figures you owe him, Pig Yount has just the same as warned you that he plans on robbing the bank. What does Fred Tull think about that?"

"The sheriff scoffs at the idea, claiming Pig Yount and his bunch have never been known to pull a raid this far south of the Indian Nations, where they have a hide-out," the banker replied.

"Yount and his bunch have never raided this far south of the Nations, that's true," Long Sam shrugged. "But that's no guarantee that they won't. I'll poke into Saddle Rock and see if I can find out what ails Fred Tull's thinkin'."

"What ails that old scamp's thinking is something for the voters to consider!" Logan said crisply. "Besides, the sheriff is away. He left yesterday afternoon on the stage for the southern part of the county. Ed Mayfield, the constable, said the sheriff would not be back until Saturday."

"Judas!" Long Sam growled. "This is only Monday. With Sheriff Tull due to be out of town a whole week, what better chance could Pig Yount want to make a pass at your bank?"

"Don't think I haven't considered that!" Logan declared.

"You still want me to stick around here?" Long Sam asked slowly.

"You don't know how I could make that wish any plainer," Logan said. "If I put cattle out here and Pig Yount finds it out, he'll try to steal or shoot those cattle out of spite."

Again Long Sam knew that rare sense of happiness. He looked at the peaceful valley and at the low, pine-forested hills, remembering how it had been here for almost three weeks. He looked back at Arthur Logan finally, and found the banker's eyes, cold and bright, watching him intently.

"I'll take that cow-punching job, Mr. Logan," he said.

"Good!" Arthur Logan said quickly. "I'll have to go now, and let Matt Holden show me around the place, although I've already made up my mind to buy it."

The banker hurried away, and Long Sam sat on the edge of the porch, smoky eyes narrow and thoughtful as he considered the situation.

"Blamed if I can figure that Logan feller!" Long Sam grumbled. "He recognized me, otherwise he'd have been asking my name. The look in his eye said he'd rather cut my throat than speak civil to me, yet blamed if he didn't give me a steady job. The 'Wanted' posters that runt of a Joe Fry keeps tacking up paint me as a cold-blooded killer and dangerous gunman. Does Logan, having recognized me, figure the tough rep those posters give me would keep Pig Yount and his bunch away from this ranch? Or did that mean look that kept getting into Logan's eye indicate that he's fixing to

hand me the dirty end of a stick? That's what I'm wondering about."

LONG Sam was still sitting there on the porch, trying to puzzle the situation out, when Arthur Logan and young Matt Holden finished their tour of inspection. Matt Holden waddled to the buckboard and crawled up to the seat, grinning at Long Sam as he mopped his face.

"Guess you won't have to leave after all, Slim!" the fat youth said, chuckling. "Mr. Logan says he'll buy, and at my price."

Arthur Logan untied the lines from the buckboard wheel, climbed aboard, and looked levelly at Long Sam.

"You'll not forget to stay here—er—Slim?" he asked.

"I told you that I'd be here, didn't I?" Long Sam countered, vexed without knowing just why.

The banker nodded hastily, the hard gleam brighter, now, in his eyes. He clucked to the horses, and turned the buckboard sharply about. Long Sam scowled after the rig until it was down the slope and into the oak timber, out of sight. The outlaw remained on the porch, feeling fretful and uneasy. He went into the ranch house an hour later to begin checking over his supplies.

"Fish from the bayou and young squirrels from the timber would keep me in meat," he said aloud. "But I'm running low on other stuff—coffee, especially. Maybe if I stretch my supplies I can make 'em last until Saturday. When I go to town I sure want to have a talk with old Fred Tull, so I'll try to make what I have last."

"Talkin' to hisself, they say, is a sure sign that a man has gone loco!" a dry voice interrupted.

Long Sam leaped so violently he almost overturned a heavy table. He reeled back, whipping guns from holsters as he whirled to face the back door. A gaunt, white-haired man was standing there on the threshold, laughing at him. Long Sam blinked a couple of times, then grinned sheepishly and pushed his guns into holsters.

"Fred Tull, you old wart-hog!" he laughed. "What's the idea cat-footing up behind— Say! You're supposed to be down in the south part of this county, I heard."

Long Sam shook hands with the white maned sheriff as he talked. The sheriff was still grinning faintly, hard gray eyes glinting and young looking in a face seamed and browned by Texas sun.

"Art Logan told you I'd gone down south, eh?" the sheriff asked drily.

"He told me that, and a lot of other blamed interesting things," Long Sam said sharply.

"Logan showed you that big bullet he packs around and told you the story about it, I see," the sheriff said, sobering. "I guess he's pretty sore at me."

"I gathered from his talk that Logan doesn't think much of you," Long Sam shrugged. "You think he's spinning windies about pumping that big slug into Pig Yount's ornery hide, three years ago?"

"I think Logan is tellin' the truth," the sheriff answered quietly. "Pig Yount is in this neck of the woods, Sam, and has been for a week."

"Blazes!" Long Sam exclaimed.

"I hope to stop the bandits before they ever hit the bank!" the old sheriff said grimly. "Soon as I saw that bullet Art Logan got through the mail, and heard the story of the slug, I saw a chance of tolling Pig Yount and his bunch into a trap. I let on to Logan that I thought he was spinning a windy, and told around town that I thought he was joshing about havin' shot that bullet into Pig Yount's hide."

"Couldn't you have told Logan your purpose in calling him a wind-jammer?"

TULL smiled and shook his head at Long Sam.

"Art Logan is a banker, and a good one," the sheriff said wryly. "But he's no poker player, Sam. If I told him what I've been doing and what I hope to do, he'd never be able to keep from showing that there was something in the wind. Add that to the fact that Pig Yount is sure to have friends in Saddle Rock who would have to be completely fooled before that fat bandit could be coaxed into a trap, and you have the answer to why I had to be maybe a little rough on Art Logan."

"What kind of trap are you setting for Yount and his bunch?" Long Sam wanted to know.

"One that'll work—I hope!" the sheriff said gravely. "A Mexican friend of mine,

who has a ranch south of Saddle Rock, come in last week and told me that a big, fat feller had been hanging around his place lately, asking questions about trails through the thicket country that lies beyond these hills."

"You think the fat fellow was Pig Yount, eh?" Long Sam said excitedly.

"This friend of mine, Felix Madero, described Pig Yount to a fare-thee-well!" the sheriff answered with a nod.

"I'll be dogged!" Long Sam snorted. "Pig Yount evidently aims to hit the Saddle Rock bank, then head south for Mexico instead of running north to the Nations."

"That's the way I figure it," the old sheriff said grimly. "So I've been quietly rounding up men I can trust, Sam. I've got fellers in Saddle Rock who will be on guard, day and night, with buckshot guns. Hid out in the brush around Felix Madero's place are a dozen more men. Me and twenty men will be strung out through these hills, hoping to nail Yount and his bunch before they ever get to town and make a swipe at the bank."

"If you were after anybody but Pig Yount, Fred, I'd say the bandits didn't have a chance," Long Sam scowled.

"You take your foot in your hand and scoot north!" the sheriff snorted. "I saw Art Logan and Matt Holden come up this way in a rig, and followed to see what they were up to. You get moving unless yuh want Joe Fry on yore neck."

"Is that cigar eatin' runt around here?" Long Sam growled.

"Fry has been in Saddle Rock for almost two weeks, hinting that you're hid out around there somewhere and that I know where to find you," the sheriff said and chuckled. "After what happened to him in Kansas, Art Logan hates bandits worse than poison. Fry has got him thinkin' you're one of the Yount gang, Sam."

"Thunder and blazes!" Long Sam growled. "Logan is buying this land off young Matt Holden. He gave me a job, made me promise to wait here until he can send out cattle he owns."

"Cattle, your eye!" the sheriff snorted. "Art Logan recognized you and gave you that song about a job to keep you here until he can tell Fry where to find you."

"Having a job was nice—while it lasted!" Long Sam grinned wryly. "But thanks for warning me, Fred. Joe Fry won't try sneaking up here until after dark, that's certain. Let's take a fishin' rig I've got and go catch us a mess of channel catfish out of that bayou, yonder."

"I can't stay, Sam, much as I'd like a bait of catfish and maybe a handful of hush puppies cooked in the grease that fried 'em!" The sheriff gave a sigh.

"I've got no corn meal to make hush puppies, but we could sure have the fish fry," Long Sam said.

"Quit tempting me, darn it!" the sheriff grumbled. "I've got to go string my twenty men through these hills to watch for that Yount, and it'll be night before I get the job done. You saddle old Sleeper and quit this country until things quiet down."

"I'll spend most of the day snoozin', so's I can spend a good part of the night in the saddle," the gaunt outlaw said with a chuckle. "Joe Fry won't try snaggin' me until dark."

BITTERLY Long Sam was to regret being so positive of Joe Fry's actions. When the sheriff was gone, the outlaw rigged up his fishing outfit, which consisted simply of a long, thin sprout he had cut, a length of small but strong line, and a size one-ought hook. He ambled down across the meadow, swatting grasshoppers with the tough pole.

When Long Sam came back across the meadow a half hour later he had two speckled, fork-tailed channel "cats" wiggling on a piece of stout cord. He dressed the fish at a spring back of the old house, then cooked and ate a hearty meal. As soon as his tin dishes and cooking utensils were washed and stacked, the outlaw lugged his bedroll into the front room, spread it where a breeze from the open door and front window would strike him, then pulled off boots and shirt and stretched out.

Long Sam's smoky eyes closed and within moments he was sound asleep. He dreamed that he was hunting squirrels, and began laughing when he saw one perched on an oak branch, wearing a derby hat like Joe Fry wore. The squirrel seemed to have growled something in a voice so surprisingly similar to Fry's that Long Sam quit dreaming. He opened his eyes, still grinning over the idea of a

squirrel wearing a derby. Then Long Sam's grin was gone. His eyes bugged out and his long fingers began clawing splinters off the floor where his guns and belts should have been.

That derby hat he had been laughing at was there, smack above his goggle-eyed face. Only the hat was not there, smack above his goggle-eyed face. Only the hat was not on a squirrel. It was on Joe Fry's sandy-haired head, slanted down over one cold gray eye that was glittering in hellish delight. Long Sam rested there on his own bony elbows, half sitting and half leaning, too flabbergasted to do anything but gape.

A cocked six-shooter in Joe Fry's blocky right fist almost touched the outlaw's nose, and he could see his own belts and guns lying over beside the front door. And standing just behind Joe Fry was Arthur Logan, looking tight-lipped and a little pale.

"This, Sammy boy, will make every paper in Texas!" Fry chortled. "Long Sam Littlejohn, most feared gunman and thief in Texas, taken without a fight!"

Long Sam got the slack out of his jaw. He pulled in a slow breath, smoky eyes reaching past Fry to rake Arthur Logan slowly up and down.

"Thanks for the double-cross!" he said slowly.

"Shut up, Sammy, and crawl into your shirt and boots," Fry chuckled. "Man, I've waited many a moon for this!"

"Look here, Fry!" Arthur Logan said sharply. "You promised that we'd question this fellow—use force, if necessary—to make him divulge the hiding place of his companions."

"Don't get in a dither, Logan," Joe Fry snickered.

"I don't understand this, Fry!" the banker said angrily. "You convinced me that Littlejohn is unquestionably a member of the Pig Yount bunch. Now you act as if it doesn't matter a whit!"

"Frankly, it doesn't matter!" Fry laughed. "I've got this crane-legged imitation of a human being where I want him."

"In other words, Logan, you've been this little swell-head's flunky in helpin' capture me," Long Sam droned. "But he's got no further use for you now, so forget any promises he made."

Long Sam stood up, tucked the tail of his black sateen shirt under his belt, and reached for a boot. He glanced sidewise at Fry, to find the deputy crouched and tense, watching him over the cocked Colt he held.

"Go ahead and throw a boot at me, grab at my gun, or make some other such mistake!" the deputy said warningly.

LONG Sam snorted disdainfully, pulled his right boot on, and reached for the left one. Arthur Logan stalked forward just then, white to the lips, temper flaring in his hard eyes.

"Littlejohn is right!" the banker said harshly. "Fry, you have misled me in this matter. Confound you, turn around, look me in the eye, and deny it if you can!"

The banker seized Fry's bent right arm as he talked. Long Sam dropped flat, feeling certain the gun in the deputy marshal's right hand would go off. It did, the blast seeming to shake the whole house. Long Sam did not know where the bullet went, and did not care. He rolled over, a wicked grin stretching his lips when he saw Fry pounding his left fist into the banker's face, while Logan held grimly to the deputy's gun arm.

Long Sam leaped to his feet, the boot he had meant to stick his left foot into clutched in both hands. He brought the boot crashing down on Fry's derby, then hit the deputy in the back with one bony shoulder, traveling full tilt. Fry howled at the top of his lungs, smashed hard against Arthur Logan, and they both went down.

Fry bawled in pain, the gun skidding out of his fingers. Long Sam snatched it up, hopped clear, and pushed the captured pistol into his waistband. He bent over, tugged his left boot on, and saw Joe Fry sit up. Long Sam plunged down the room, picked up his own pliant belts and buckled them on. Fry jumped to his feet and stood there, so raging mad he quivered from head to toe.

"You'll pay for this, Logan!" the deputy howled. "You allowed this murdering outlaw to escape. I'll jail you for that, you nickel-nurser."

Arthur Logan got up, all the anger shocked out of him now. He looked at Long Sam, then at Joe Fry. The banker

swallowed hard, glancing about as if seeking some avenue of escape.

"I had no slightest intention of helping Littlejohn escape, Fry!" he said stiffly. "I did lose my temper and do something I should not have done. But I did not intend to aid him."

Arthur Logan broke off, head turning suddenly towards the door. Long Sam had already heard the sound—the rapid drumming of shod hoofs coming up the slope toward the house. Joe Fry heard, too and a hopeful look came into his raging eyes.

"Stay where you are, Runt, or I'll bullet-cripple you!" Long Sam snapped, and slid his right hand Colt from leather.

Fry cursed through grinding teeth, but still looked hopeful over the fact that those riders were approaching. Long Sam edged to the door, took a quick peek outside, then jerked his head back, astonishment written in every line of his bony face.

"From the look on your ugly mug, there must be a posse headin' this direction!" Fry jeered.

Long Sam dropped the gun he held into leather, leaped down the room, shoved an open hand into Fry's face, sticking a boot toe behind the deputy's heels at the same time. Fry landed on his back, cursing wildly as he whirled over and started to get up. But Long Sam was on him instantly, pinning him down with a bony knee. He searched Fry with frantic haste, finally yanking a pair of handcuffs from the deputy's hip pocket. Long Sam jerked the officer's wrists together across the small of his back and snapped the handcuffs on, stepping back as Fry rolled over, purple with rage.

"Keep that mouth of yours shut, Fry!" Long Sam said tensely. "The riders comin' this way are Pig Yount and two of his men, Buck Conlan and Sperry Millard. They're on lathered horses. My hunch is they've made a pass at Logan's bank, and run into a buckshot-gun brigade Fred Tull had waiting for them."

"Good heavens!" Arthur Logan croaked. "That *is* Pig Yount."

"Get away from that window!" Long Sam ordered.

THE BANKER jumped back, turning to goggle at the outlaw. Horses came pounding into the yard then, and Long Sam jumped to the wall near the door, his black-butted guns palmed.

"We're out of luck, Pig!" a harsh voice cried. "Ain't nobody lived at this place in a long time. We'll get no fresh hosses here."

"I can't figure it!" a deep, anger-thickened voice came now. "Somebody got onto our plans, boys. Those buzzards showin' up fast as they did, and all packin' buckshot guns, proves it. If we'd headed on south, the way we had planned, I've got a hunch we'd have run into another gun trap."

"But all of our relay hosses are strung out down south of that cussed town!" another voice said angrily. "Pig, me and the other boys tried to talk you out of sending that rifle slug back to Arthur Logan and writing that fool note. Old Fred Tull has taken them things a lot more serious than our friends around Saddle Rock reported that he did. Now Ott and Pawnee are dead!"

"Keep your shirt on, Buck!" Pig Yount's deep voice rumbled. "I feel as bad about Ott and Pawnee as you and Sperry do. But us three will make it back to the Nations. With this swag on my saddle, added to what's already in our money belts, we'll get to South America."

"My bank!" Arthur Logan howled. "They've robbed me again."

Long Sam Littlejohn went out the front door like a tomcat with its tail on fire. He was cussing Arthur Logan at every jump, but raking Pig Yount, Buck Conlan and Sperry Millard with smoky eyes that were coldly alert. The three outlaws had been turning their horses, aiming to ride away from the old ranchhouse. At the sound of Logan's anguished voice they brought those blowing mounts around, hands dropping to holsters.

"Littlejohn!" Pig Yount rumbled. "You long-eared mule, what was that you hollered about— Arthur Logan, by thunder!"

Pig Yount reared up in the saddle as he quit speaking. The huge, thick hulk of him seemed to swell and grow to giant proportions. Yount's long-jawed face was mottled with the emotions that stirred him. There was something fiendish in small, pale eyes that lurked behind hooding lids. Although he dared not take his eye off the three desperadoes, Long Sam knew that Pig Yount was watching Arthur

Logan, for he had heard dragging steps come into the open door behind him.

"So we finally meet, face to face, eh, Logan?" Pig Yount's voice was like the growl of some fierce animal.

"Pig, watch yourself!" Buck Conlan said sharply. "Sam Littlejohn has guns on us."

Buck Conlan sat half crouched in the saddle, big shoulders hunched, every muscle in his tall body tensed. His hawk-ish dark features looked a little pale. There was venom in the jetty glances he turned Long Sam's way.

"Littlejohn won't buy chips in my game!" Pig Yount croaked. "Sperry?"

"Yeah, Pig?" Sperry Millard spoke evenly.

"Watch Littlejohn!" Yount said thickly. "Kill him if he acts like he aims to horn in."

A sour grin twisted the corners of Sperry Millard's thin mouth. He flicked Long Sam with cold gray eyes, slim shoulders lifting in a faint shrug.

"Littlejohn has us nailed down, Pig," he said coolly.

Pig Yount cursed, took his vicious eyes off Arthur Logan for the first time since the banker had come out to the porch. The huge bandit pulled in a slow breath, wide mouth peeling back from broad, yellow teeth as he met Long Sam's smoky eyes.

"Put away those guns, Sam!" he ordered.

"Quit dreaming, fat boy!" Long Sam droned. "If I crack a cap, Pig, you get the slug."

PIG YOUNT cursed, the huge bulk of him suddenly settling slowly into the saddle. There was a mingling of fear and uncertainty in his eyes as he locked glances with Long Sam. And the crisis passed, then. Long Sam knew that when Pig Yount hesitated. Yount's wide mouth opened and the beginning of a wrathful tirade was rumbling from his throat when Long Sam's victory was shattered, his chance of avoiding a dangerous gun-fight suddenly wiped away.

"Good work, Deputy Littlejohn!" a harsh voice rang inside the old house. "Yount, how do you and those other two like being captured by a gent who used to be on the dodge, too? This is Joe Fry, Deputy U. S. Marshal orating. Meet my deputy, Long Sam Littlejohn!"

It was the one thing Fry could have said that would have pushed Pig Yount and his two men into defying the cold drop. Of all men along the frontier, a turn-coat outlaw was the most hated, feared and shunned by other law breakers. Joe Fry knew that, and in his bitter moment of personal defeat, had chosen well in seeking a way to set three dangerous gunmen onto Long Sam.

"A dirty traitor, are you?" Pig Yount roared at Long Sam. "A sneaking scalp hunter, using what you learned about other outlaws to help the law run them down!"

Pig Yount's voice was drowned in the heavy roar of two guns, blasting almost in unison. Lanky Buck Conlan had suddenly folded at the middle, gone plummeting down from the saddle, a six-shooter in his practised right hand flinging leaden slugs at Long Sam. But Littlejohn had seen the play coming, and his own left-hand gun roared even as Conlan fired, and tried to drop down behind his horse. Buck Conlan's hat flew off—and most of the top of his skull with it.

But the damage was done. Sperry Millard threw himself backwards over the tail of his horse, his twin six-shooters blazing. Long Sam felt as if a sledge had hit him in the left side, and had to take two running back-steps to even keep on his feet. Long Sam threw a fast shot that knocket the Stetson off Pig Yount's yellow-thatched head, then fell crashing on his face when Sperry Millard jumped out from behind his horse and put a bullet through his right thigh.

Long Sam could hear Arthur Logan shouting wildly, while Joe Fry whooped and laughed like a man on a gleeful binge. The gaunt outlaw's head was swimming from the pain of two wounds, yet his smoky eyes were still alert, his hands steady. He sent a shot smashing under the barrel of the horse that shielded Sperry Millard, hearing Millard's wild howl of pain when the big bullet bit into his shin. The horse jumped away, and Sperry Millard hit the ground, face savage behind spitting guns. Long Sam drove a slug squarely into Sperry Millard's snarling mouth, then rolled with a convulsive violence as a bullet from Pig Yount's

pistol ripped across the small of his back.

Pig Yount was still in the saddle, spurs raking the ribs of his horse as he tried to force the animal straight into the blazing thunder of Long Sam's guns. Yount's own six-shooter was flaming again, and Long Sam felt the bullet scrape across the top of his shoulder as he reared up, both guns roaring and jumping. Pig Yount went back in the saddle as if a club had slammed him in the face. He hung there for a second, then came crashing down when his horse whirled.

"In heaven's name, man, are you still alive?" Arthur Logan croaked.

LONG SAM levered himself to his feet, pain burning his left side and right thigh. He saw Arthur Logan start from the doorway, white and shaken. Then Logan cried out wildly as he was flung tumbling. Long Sam cursed and tried to lunge at Joe Fry, who had come hurtling through the doorway, one blocky shoulder smashing Arthur Logan out of his path.

Fry had his handcuffed wrists in front of him now, and was removing the handcuffs, using his key. He was lunging towards the edge of the porch, trying to dodge Long Sam. The gaunt outlaw stuck out a long leg, tripped Fry. Fry howled angrily and tried to roll off the porch, but Long Sam reached out with a smoke-fouled six-shooter, whacked the badge-man solidly above one ear.

"What made Fry go berserk?" Arthur Logan panted.

Long Sam glowered angrily at the banker, working at reloading and holstering his famous guns. Logan stopped short, gulping uneasily at the truculent look of the gaunt outlaw.

"Joe Fry wasn't berserk!" Long Sam snapped. "The little whelp aimed to get down in the yard, snatch up one of the guns Pig Yount and his men won't be using any more, and blast me to kingdom come."

"Littlejohn, I don't know what to say!" Arthur Logan burst out. "Do you realize that you've not only saved my bank, but put an end to one of the most dangerous outlaw bands in the Southwest?"

"With no thanks to you or Joe Fry, either!" Long Sam growled. "Quit standing around with your thumb in your ear, and see if the loot from your bank isn't in that slicker roll behing Pig Yount's saddle."

Arthur Logan hopped down into the yard, talking coaxingly to the frightened horse that had been Pig Yount's mount. A few moments later he was back on the porch, pale and shaking violently as he stared down into the open mouth of a meal sack he had taken from Yount's slicker roll. Logan said something, his words low and shaky. But Long Sam did not hear the words. Long Sam stepped to the front door, then went inside the old house. He hurried through to the kitchen, wabbly on his feet from the pain of his wounds.

"That tap I gave Joe Fry's skull won't keep the little wolverine quiet too long," the gaunt outlaw panted.

Long Sam snatched up saddle, blanket and bridle, then stepped out the back door. His pain-whitened lips grinned a little when he saw Sleeper, dozing in the shade of a bush out towards the old corrals. He limped to the horse and saddled up, swinging aboard just as Arthur Logan's voice rang out, calling his name.

"Littlejohn, answer me!" the banker yelled frantically. "Don't leave until I can reward you for the recovery of the bank's money. Littlejohn, do you hear me?"

Long Sam grinned wryly, walking Sleeper quietly away through the screening brush.

"Sift along, Sleeper," the outlaw said. "We'll find a creek where I can dress these wounds, then push country behind us for a spell. Let Arthur Logan think I'm sore at him. Maybe the son-of-a-gun will be more inclined to judge a man by what he knows about him than what he hears about him, after this."

Watch for LONG SAM CROWNS A KING, the next Outlaw Littlejohn story by LEE BOND—Coming Soon!

AN EXCITING TRUE STORY OF THE BORDER featuring the exploits of Captain Santos Benavides, scourge of the badlands!

DON SANTOS of the RIO GRANDE

by HAROLD PREECE

A HUNDRED yards separated the two groups of armed horsemen, cocking carbines and measuring each other for death, out there in the sagebrush. Both groups wore the high-peaked sombreros and the lavishly-colored serapes of the border Mexicans. But the men whose mounts fidgeted to charge wore the star of the Texas Rangers.

Those on the other side still dripped water from their cotton breeches. And the muddy banks of the nearby Rio Grande, dividing Texas from Mexico, still bore the fresh imprint made by the hoofs of their horses.

Mexican eyed Mexican as scared jackrabbits scurried for cover, that bright morning in May, 1861. Then a man rode forth from the ranks of the wet legs and held up his hand. The warm Texas sun gleamed on his heavy chest and on the epaulettes adorning his military jacket. Gay tassels floated from the mane of his horse. His polished silver spurs caught the reflection of the scarlet-red prickly pears.

The Rangers lowered their guns an inch, but kept him covered as the horse advanced in a slow trot.

Halfway, he reined up. He made a courtly bow from his saddle, and called out in Spanish:

"Salud, caballeros. Allow me the favor of speaking to your commander. Don Santos Benavides."

Another big, swarthy man rode out from the ranks of the Rangers. His clothes were neat without splendor. His well-kept beard was trimmed to a point like a Spanish grandee's. He sat a little stiffly in his saddle like a man long unused to riding. A gold cross dangled from his neck. It contrasted oddly with the two Colt .45s that bulged from his stout hips.

Ranger Warns Bandit

He stopped his mount in speaking distance of the hombre with the fine get-up. The resplendent one bowed again, and Santos Benavides acknowledged his presence with a curt nod.

"Allow me to present myself, *El Capitano* Benavides," the handsome man purred. "I am General Juan Nepomueceno Cortinas, looking for cattle stolen from my ranch in Mexico."

"Or to steal some to run into Mexico," the Ranger captain cut in sharply. "I know no General Juan Cortinas. I know a thieving rustler, Juan Cortinas, who'll be strung up with a saddle rope unless he heads out of Texas pronto."

Cortinas' lip trembled in the barest trace of anger.

"The heat has upset the senor," he answered drily. "Forgive me. But it is strange to see men of Mexican blood riding under the flag of the accursed *Tejanos*. You yourself, Don Santos."

Don Santos turned his head for a second and glanced proudly at his men—the only Spanish-speaking company of the Texas Rangers. His scorn of the man before him matched his pride in his outfit as he answered:

"We are Mexican citizens of Texas and the Confederate States. Our brothers across the border are welcome—when they come honorably."

His sharp eyes bored into the bandit's for a minute.

"That does not include you and your pack of lobos, Senor Cortinas. You have five minutes to leave Texas. Or my men will be writing your passports for you in lead."

The bandit edged a little closer to the Ranger. "Look, senor," he said lowering his voice. "You are a business man—the greatest business man of the border. Let me make you a business proposition.

"Why should we Mexicans kill each other for the gringos? With the gringos of the North fighting the gringos of the South, we Mexicans can unite on both sides of the border and reclaim Texas which once belonged to us. Then Don Santos Benavides—Don Juan Cortinas—every other Mexican—will talk with golden pockets."

Don Santos' fist shot out. It caught the exposed chin of Cortinas and the bandit's flesh cracked under the blow. Cortinas half-reeled in his saddle, balanced himself in his stirrups and glared at the Ranger Captain.

"At your service, senor," he spat out the words with a couple of teeth. He waved to his men who rode forward in a thundering gallop. And from the other side, the Texans with the brown skins spurred across the sagebrush.

Thirty-six rifles drew the first blood from seventy border bandits. Shouting, "*Vivo* Texas! *Vivo* Don Santos!" the Rangers sent a withering volley into the bodies of Cortinas' outlaws.

Sixteen Outlaws Die

Sixteen bandits toppled from their ponies in the first fierce fusillade. The Rangers swept like a wave of death into the midst of the invaders, knocking them from their horses with gun butts, then hunting them down to die when they crawled into patches of shin oak.

Don Santos found himself hemmed in

by four of the hell hombres. Bullets plowed through the top of his tall sombrero. It went flying across the Rio Grande. Another bullet ripped his serape into two jagged halves. Six shots grazed six places on his skin. A lead pill, that might have pierced his jugular, glanced harmlessly off when it hit the cross hanging around his neck.

His horse reared high in the air. But, by now, he was getting the feel of a saddle as he was getting the feel of a good fight. He brought the cayuse under control and back on its four legs. He dug his feet firm in the stirrups. Then a Colt in each hand, he started paying his respects to the lobos.

One bandit stared like an idiot for a brief second after Don Santos' bullet hit him just above the heart. Then he fell in the sea of pounding hoofs. A second bullet crashed through the skull of a second lobo. Don Santos' Colts barked simultaneously. And two bandits, who'd nevermore see Mexico, went to sleep the same instant in Texas.

The Ranger captain looked around him. The sagebrush was bent down with the bodies of dead raiders. The Rangers had been outnumbered almost two to one. But of seventy lobos who had violated the sovereignty of Texas, less than a dozen were left alive. That dozen was scrambling into the Rio Grande, dashing madly out of Texas. Their leader, Cortinas, his shiny epaulettes shot off by Ranger bullets, was leading the parade.

Don Santos grabbed a carbine from a wounded Ranger. None of his men had been killed. He picked off two more of the retreating raiders as they scrambled up the river bank into Mexico. He was sorry that one of them wasn't Cortinas, the common cow thief who styled himself a general.

Then his eyes roved in triumph over the dead rustlers.

"*Bueno trabajo* (good work), my *Tejanos*," he said. "Maybe, they didn't get their passports to Mexico. But for certain, *camaradas*, you wrote their passports to Boot Hill."

Writing bad hombres passports to Boot Hill had been the business of Don Santos Benavides since all America had been plunged into turmoil by the Civil War, starting a few months before. Before that, his business had been selling hay and groceries to the Rio Grande *rancheros*. The undisputed leader of the Texas Mexicans, he had also served a term as mayor of Laredo. A born aristocrat, he was proud that his family was one of the oldest in Texas.

Don Santos Joins Rangers

He could have moved his business quietly across the border when Texas started shooting its way out of the Union as it had once shot its way in. Confederate recruiting officers were slow to enlist the Texas Mexicans, who were considered of doubtful loyalty.

Then all the able-bodied men of the gringos went away to fight. Texas lay exposed to the ruthless raiders from across the Rio Grande. Don Santos, the rich merchant prince, vowed to defend his native state.

He vowed also to defend his beloved Laredo. His grandfather had founded that prosperous border town before it had been captured for Texas by the first great Ranger captain, Jack Hays. Don Santos was proud when, at the outbreak of the war, Governor Edward Clark authorized him to raise a Ranger company to guard the frontier.

The Governor didn't say that the new Ranger recruits had to be of any particular race. Shrewd Don Santos took advantage of that to prove the loyalty of his kinsmen: Mexican by descent but Texan by birth. Within a week, the first Mexican captain in the history of the Texas Rangers was presenting the first Mexican company to Colonel "Rip" Ford, veteran Ranger now serving as Confederate district commander.

And "a more gallant set of men than the one hundred enlisted by Captain Benavides never mounted a horse nor fought under a more gallant commander," so a noted historian of Texas has written. For during the bloody, bitter years of the Civil War, it was Don Santos and his Texas Mexicans who guarded the wide stretch of the border from Rio Grande City to Fort Ewell with lead and steel. It was Don Santos and his hard-riding deadshots who struck terror into those who crossed the border to prey off a war-stricken people.

Since all his men were Spanish-speaking, Don Santos was able to riddle the border gangs with his trusted spies. His eyes saw everywhere because his intelligence men saw and reported everything. He ferreted out the secret operatives of Cortinas, preaching reunion with Mexico, among the Texas Mexicans. He sent them packing across the border under the threat of the rope if they ever came back. He made the Mexicans on our side of the border feel proud of their kin—his fearless Rangers—who rode for Texas.

He made the brown-skinned people proud of being Texans. "Texas is the country of our fathers," he declared at public meetings in hot little towns where English was seldom heard. "And our fathers were not bandits, but hard-working farmers and *rancheros.*"

"Stand by Texas, *amigos!* For men of honor do not betray that which is theirs."

Spy Warns of Raid

Late in 1862, a spy galloped into the Ranger camp. He reported to Don Santos that a band of rustlers attached to another lobo chief, Ochoa, had crossed the border.

Don Santos and a Ranger squad set out in pursuit. They trailed the gang across three hundred miles of sage and chaparral. They had ridden for three days and nights without rest when their ears caught the distant lowing of cattle.

Don Santos beckoned to two Rangers. The three dismounted and walked in the direction of the sound—a dense mesquite thicket, two miles from the Rio Grande. Silently creeping through the brush, they sighted six hombres riding herd on a spread of cattle stolen, that very day, from a Texas ranch.

The three men quickly pulled off their Ranger stars and tucked them in their pockets. Then they walked toward the rustlers, shouting loudly:

"*Buenas tardes, amigos.* We were sent to help you."

The rustlers eyed them narrowly as they approached. "You were sent to help us," the leader of the gang repeated slowly. "May I ask who sent you, *señores?*"

Don Santos winked shrewdly. "Senor Ochoa."

The leader deliberated as he puffed a huge brown cigarette that he rolled deftly with one hand.

"Senor Ochoa promised me three more men to get this herd across the river," he said finally. "But where are your horses, *hombres?*"

"The accursed Rangers," Don Santos answered. "They pursued us and shot our *caballos* from under us."

"Bring our friends three horses from our remuda," the head bandit commanded another. "All those who hate the Texas Rangers are one with us."

Don Santos and his two comrades mounted the ponies. The bandits headed the cattle down a trail leading southwest to the Rio Grande. Then Don Santos spurred up beside the leader.

"I know a shorter path, *amigo,*" he whispered, "one that the Rangers have never found. Let me show you."

Unsuspectingly, the bandit ordered the gang to turn the cattle in the direction indicated by the newcomer. The way led straight to the place where the Rangers lay in ambush.

Hiding behind huge cactus plants, the Texans saw the bandits approaching. They rubbed their eyes in amazement when they saw their captain guiding the lobos. Then they realized the ruse and readied their guns.

When the bandits were level with them, they swarmed out of the cactus. The surprised leader drew his pistol. Don Santos' gun barked, and blood poured from the rustler's right hand. With his left hand, the outlaw aimed a long Chihuahua knife at the Ranger captain. It missed Don Santos' throat by a bare inch, but landed squarely in the heart of one of the bandits.

"We are betrayed, *companeros!*" the leader yelled. "These are the Rangers. Retreat—and ride for your lives!"

The bandits spurred their horses in a furious gallop toward the Rio Grande. Through the stampeding, bawling cattle, the Rangers pursued the fleeing thieves.

Twice, Don Santos' carbine found its mark. Twice, a fleeing outlaw fell from a saddle. Three bandits were left, and now they were in sight of the Rio Grande.

"Ride around them into the water and block them when they try to cross," Don Santos yelled to three of his men. The Rangers streaked it across a patch of sage

to the river. When the bandits started to cross, they found guns pointed at them from the middle of the stream, guns pointed at them from behind as the main body of the Rangers rode up.

"Mercy, *señores,*" the bandits began whimpering. Then they threw up their hands.

Don Santos dispatched a part of his Rangers to round up the scared cattle for return to their owners. Their prisoners bound in their saddles, the rest of the Texans started toward headquarters.

"Take a last look across the Rio Grande, *señores,*" Don Santos commanded the lobos. "And make it a long one. It's the last time you'll ever see Mexico."

Three days later, the bandits were swinging from the cottonwood trees in the old Plaza of Laredo.

For the next six months, Don Santos and his Rangers mopped up in the brush country of the Rio Grande. They killed so many owlhoots that Don Santos lost count on his record book. They hurled back wild tribes of Mexican Indians, crossing the border to grab their share of plunder. A band of roving Apaches from Sonora finally fled from Texas, and retreated far into the Mexican interior after hearing that Don Santos had threatened to cross the border and exterminate them like grasshoppers.

The name of Santos Benavides was on the lips of every Texan. The state legislature sent him and his kinsman, Captain Refugio Benavides, a resolution of gratitude "for the vigilance, energy and gallantry displayed by them in pursuing and chastising the bandits infesting the Rio Grande frontier." The Governor presented Don Santos with a handsome pistol especially made by the finest gunmaker in the South.

But now the time had come when Don Santos must defend Texas and his beloved Laredo, not against hostile Mexicans but against hostile *Americanos.*

Federal Troops Are Sighted

On the morning of March 18, 1864, a Mexican *vaquero* galloped into Laredo to inform Don Santos that the Federal troops were advancing on the town.

By that time, the brown-skinned Rangers had won so many battles and killed so many bandits that they had been transferred into the regular Confederate cavalry, with Don Santos as their colonel and commander. Most of them were camped at a ranch that had been often raided by rustlers, twenty-five miles above Laredo.

Hurriedly, Don Santos ordered another kinsman, Captain Cristobal Benavides, to march the small Confederate garrison into the Plaza.

"There are five thousand bales of cotton in the Plaza," he told the Captain. "It belongs to the Confederacy. If the day goes against us, fire it. Be sure to burn it properly, so that not a bale of it falls into the hands of the Yankees. Then you shall set my new house on fire so that nothing of mine shall pass to the enemy. Let their victory be a barren one."

"*Si, señor,*" replied the Captain. The two swapped salutes. Then Don Santos' spurs were biting into the flanks of his horse. And the pony was tearing the wind toward the ranch where camped his master's men.

Don Santos' force galloped into the Plaza at three in the afternoon. The Confederate defenders, including the garrison, totalled no more than sixty.

At four, the advance guard of the Federals—two hundred handsomely armed cavalrymen—stormed into Laredo. Don Santos' scouts had informed him that three hundred Yankee infantrymen were not far behind.

The little force of Texans charged with rusty rifles, with pistols that had few cartridges, with clubs and stones. Sixty men fought two hundred from street to street, from housetop to housetop of the little town. Raking shell fire shattered windows and stripped the bark from the ancient trees in the Plaza. Citizens of Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, across the Rio Grande, lined up on their side of the river to watch the battle.

In two hours, half of Laredo was in the hands of the invaders. But the Texans had fought so well that only half a dozen had been slain. Scores of the Federals lay dead in the streets.

Santos Asks For Aid

"Even so, we are whipped and Laredo, one of the last river ports left to the Confederacy is lost, unless we get reinforce-

ments," Don Santos said. He sent a courier on horseback to the nearest Confederate commander, Captain Giddings, whose hundred and fifty men were garrisoned at Eagle Pass, not too far away.

"Tell Giddings to hurry here with men," Don Santos ordered the courier. But before Giddings arrived, the Federals had scattered in a rout. Inch by inch, the hard-fighting Texans, most of them ex-Rangers, drove the attackers half a mile beyond the town. Then in one desperate charge, they sent them flying up the Rio Grande.

"It might have been different at Gettysburg if you'd commanded our men," Giddings told Don Santos when he marched his men into Laredo.

Don Santos frowned. "You will retract that statement, *El Capitano*," he said. "It is a reflection on our brave General Lee."

There was talk of a different kind among the fleeing Federals. "If I ever get out of this," moaned a young Yankee sergeant, "I'm going back to Pennsylvania and raise pigs. I'd rather fight tigers than fight Texans."

When the Confederacy collapsed, Don Santos surrendered honorably like his friend General Lee. He rebuilt his ruined business; he served a term in the legislature.

"I've lived under five of the six flags that have flown over Texas," he said before his death around the turn of the century. "I'm proud that I was loyal to Texas under all five of them."

"Let 'em Have It, Boys! Don't Let Any of the Sidewinders Get Away!"

JIM HATFIELD was putting up a magnificent bluff as he yelled this command. He and old Tom Mawson were alone on the trail—and the wideloopers were coming on, accompanied by the sounds of bawling cows and pounding hoofs. A jostling, jumbled mass in the strengthening light of dawn, the herd suddenly swept into view . . . and Hatfield's guns let go with a rattling crash.

Mawson was also shooting as fast as he could pull trigger. An old Indian fighter, he cut loose with a series of Apache cries that the echoes magnified tenfold.

Two saddles were emptied at once. Then a third owlhoot toppled from his hull. Shouts of terror and screams of pain rocked the air. A deep voice roared:

"Hightail! Hightail and scatter! It's a trap!"

The wideloopers burst in every direction, howling and cursing and flinging random shots at nothing in particular. Hatfield felt the wind of a passing bullet . . . and then the rustlers were out of pistol range, racing away in mad flight.

"I reckon they think the whole Bradded M bunch was here," chuckled Hatfield. . . .

That's only one of the breath-taking incidents in THE RIMROCK RAIDERS, the smashing Jim Hatfield novel by Jackson Cole coming in the next issue. It's a novel of skulduggery on the range in the wake of a bitter struggle between the ranchers and the oilmen in the vicinity—a novel packed with action, surprises and Frontier wisdom. Look forward to THE RIMROCK RAIDERS—it's a roaring humdinger, start to finish!

CABIN OF NO RETURN

by

WILLIS

TRAIN

Jim Garrett's gold pieces brought him all the luck that he needed!

The three men came at Garrett with guns roaring

WITH THE SNOW still coming down steadily Jim Garrett decided he was lucky to have found this apparently deserted log cabin back in the hills. There was shelter for his horse beneath the leanto out back. The fire he had started in the old iron stove standing in one corner of the cabin was burning nicely, and its warmth felt good.

Yet the uneasiness that had been with him as he headed back into the hills early this morning was still lingering. He was like some wild animal that scented danger, but had not yet found its source.

His sheepskin-lined coat was lying on the bunk where he had carelessly tossed it when he had entered the cabin two hours ago with his flat-crowned hat beside it. At first glance he looked like any young, husky dark-haired cowboy, but a second look revealed an unmistakable matureness that showed chiefly in his eyes and the set lines around his mouth.

Garrett moved toward the stove, intending to put more wood on the fire, but he swung around, hand on the gun in his holster as he heard voices outside. He stood waiting while the door opened and three men trooped into the cabin. The last man to enter closed the door and shot the bolt into place.

"Still snowin' hard," said a big man with a black mustache. He spoke in the casual tone of one who knew Jim Garrett well and expected to find him there. "If this keeps up it's goin' to be a real storm."

The three men were warmly dressed, but snow and moisture clung to their clothing, as though they had spent some time out in the storm. They all wore guns ready to their hands, and there was a hardness in their faces that Garrett didn't like.

"I'm Cris Carter," said the big man.

"This jasper who looks like an unhappy bull-frog is Matt Leland, and the other gent is Will Ranson." He smiled at Garrett, and it was like a wolf baring its teeth. "Been here long?"

GARRETT was staring at the burlap sack Matt Leland carried. It was well filled and seemed fairly heavy. "A couple of hours," he said. "Jim Garrett is the name. Ran across this place just after the storm started and figgered it was deserted."

"Sometimes it is, and some times it isn't," Leland said in a croaking voice. He not only looked like a frog but sounded like one. "It all depends." He tossed the burlap bag in a corner.

"Depends on what?" Garrett asked.

"On where we are," Ranson said. The third member of the trio had a face like a rat and dark shifty eyes. "When we're in this part of the country we use this cabin as a hangout."

"That's right." Carter drew off his coat and then walked over and stood warming himself in front of the stove. "Welcome to the cabin of no return, Garrett."

"Why call it that?" Garrett demanded.

"Because this place has been just that for some folks," Carter said, turning and standing with his back to the stove. "Once a lawman came here figgerin' on trappin' some owlhoots. Funny thing, but no one has seen that hombre since then. He never did come back."

"Yeah," said Leland, taking off his coat. "I've often wondered whatever happened to that feller." He joined Carter at the stove. "He tried to do the old trick of pretending he was a wanted man. Trouble was those owlhoots just didn't have trustin' natures."

Garrett moved restlessly. His hand was no longer close to his gun. Something dropped to the floor, rolled to Carter's feet and stopped against his right boot. It was a gold coin. The big man reached down and picked it up. He examined it for a moment and then glanced at Garrett, a strange expression on his big, hard face.

"A twenty-dollar gold piece, eh?" Carter said. "Reckon you dropped this, Garrett."

"Thanks." Garrett took the coin and dropped it into a pocket of his trousers. It made a jingling sound as it struck against other coins in his pocket. "It must have slipped out of my pocket."

Will Ranson, who sat on the edge of a bunk at one side of the cabin, looked like a rat scenting cheese. He hadn't bothered to take off his coat.

"There aren't many twenty-dollar gold pieces around this part of the country," he said thoughtfully. "But I heard the lone bandit who held up the bank over in Red Gulch a couple of days ago got fifty of them along with some cash he took."

"I just carry a couple of twenty-dollar gold pieces for luck," Garrett said hastily, sounding a bit nervous. "I haven't been robbing any banks."

"Fifty twenty-dollar gold pieces would be a thousand dollars," said Carter, fingering his dark mustache. "That ain't so much, but we could use the dinero."

"Right." Matt Leland nodded. The frog-like man stared at the sack he had carried into the cabin. "Specially the way we got fooled on that job over at Elkhorn. Grabbing up all those money bags marked 'Five Hundred,' 'One Thousand' and the others."

"We were dumb all right," Carter agreed. "How could we know that meant one thousand pennies, and five hundred nickels, and the like? We couldn't. Shucks, if banks are going to do things like that fellers like us can't even make a living."

The big man turned toward the stove, and when he wheeled around again there was a gun in his hand covering Garrett.

"Search him, Matt," Carter ordered. "See how many of those twenty-dollar gold pieces he's carrying. And don't give him a chance to grab you like Sheriff Ware did that time."

"Yeah," said Ranson from the bunk. "That lawman had you two in a tight, grabbing Matt and using him for a shield like he did. Don't know what you'd have done if I hadn't shot Ware in the back."

Leland quickly searched through Garrett's pockets, and the frog-like man was careful not to get in the way of the

gun that Carter held covering Garrett. Leland drew out a slim roll of bills, some loose change and two twenty-dollar gold pieces.

"I haven't any fifty gold pieces," Garrett protested. "I told you I didn't rob any bank. Not me—my uncle would not like it."

"What's your uncle got to do with it?" Carter asked.

"He's a lawman," said Garrett. "It shore wouldn't set well with him if he thought his nephew was a bank robber."

He was talking fast, conscious of the fact that his Colt was still in his holster. These men had not yet demanded that he turn it over to them. With the gun in his possession, he had a chance of getting out of this cabin alive.

"Kind of careless, ain't you, Matt," Carter said. "You know better than to take any chances."

"Oh, yeah." Leland reached out and grabbed Garrett's gun out of the holster. "Sometimes I just ain't very bright."

"Sometimes?" snorted Ranson. "You mean all of the time."

Leland turned and glared at the rat-faced man. Garrett saw his chance. He grabbed Leland and held him in front of him so that Carter couldn't fire without hitting one of his own men. Leland struggled wildly, wasting a lot of breath in cursing, but Garrett held him in a powerful grip.

"Just a couple of bright hombres," said Carter disgustedly. "Will tells Garrett how the sheriff worked this trick, and Matt gives him a chance to try it." The big man thrust his gun back into the holster. "If you ask me, we're making a mistake anyway, and I was the old fool who started it by drawing down on Garrett."

"What do you mean?" Ranson still sat on the bunk, but his eyes were on Garrett and his hand was close to his gun. "I don't get it, Cris."

"Bank robbers and owlhoots should stick together," Carter said. "If Garrett is the lone bandit who robbed that bank over in Red Gulch—and I figger he is—then he is one of us."

"That's right," said Leland as he stopped struggling. "You can let me go now, Garrett. I'll give you back yore gun."

[*Turn page*]

WINS WRITING SUCCESS THOUGH CRIPPLED WITH ARTHRITIS

"When I became almost crippled with arthritis, N.I.A. training proved its value. I began acting as local correspondent for two papers. Then, I started a publication of my own. 'The Beekeeper' became a reality and a success. Were I physically able, I would crawl to the top of the house and shout the merits of the N.I.A. training."
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Garrett released the frog-like man. He didn't like the sudden change in the attitude of the trio toward him. There was something about it that wasn't quite convincing, yet he was willing to play the cards as they were dealt him.

Leland handed him his gun, and Garrett thrust it back into his holster. Ranson took his hand away from his holster and looked unhappy.

"The fifty twenty-dollar gold pieces wasn't all the lone bandit got out of that Red Gulch bank holdup," Garrett said. "Reckon it was about ten thousand in cash altogether. He hid the money in a hollow tree and then kept going."

"Aiming to find shelter and get out of the storm, I suppose," Carter said.

"Could be." Garrett nodded as Leland gave him back his money and he dropped it into his pockets. "Seems to me that if that ten thousand was split four ways the lone bandit would be likely to live longer."

"Chances are he'd die of old age," said Carter dryly. "You have any ideas where we might find a hollow tree, Garrett?"

"Might be hard to do in this weather," said Garrett. "But I could try. It will take considerable ridin' though." He frowned. "Since there's a posse on my trail I'm kind of uneasy about stayin' here anyway."

"A posse!" Ranson leaped to his feet. "Why didn't you say so before, Garrett?"

"A man is foolish to do much talkin' to strangers," Garrett said.

"Let's get moving," snapped Carter, picking up his coat and putting it on. "I don't aim to tangle with a posse."

LELAND put on his coat, and Garrett picked up his hat and sheepskin. In a few moments the four men were ready to depart. Carter opened the door, scooped up a big handful of snow and used it to put out the last glowing embers of the fire in the stove.

It was still snowing, and the wind whirled the drifts around. They went to the leanto to get their horses. Garrett found the still saddled mounts of the three men next to his own bay. He saw Ranson circle carefully around a place not far from the shed. Carter also noticed the rat-faced man's action.

"What's the matter, Will?" Carter asked. "Afraid of walking on a grave?"

Ranson merely grunted as he picked up his reins and swung into the saddle. The three other men mounted, and the four of them rode out of the leanto.

"You know where we're goin', Garrett," Carter said. "You lead the way."

"All right," Garrett said.

He rode away from the cabin, heading south across the wild, storm-swept mountain country. The snow wasn't deep enough to make traveling on horseback too difficult yet. Behind him the three men followed in single file. He knew that he risked getting a bullet in his back at any time, but that was a chance he had to take.

For hours they rode, and there were times when the wind blew the snow into their faces, so that it slid down inside the upturned collars of their coats, and Garrett could not see more than a few feet ahead of him. But they kept on.

"How much further?" Carter finally demanded, riding up beside Garrett. "I can't stand much more of this cold and snow."

"Getting close to the place now," Garrett said. "I'm shore of that."

He rode on, and Carter dropped back and followed. Behind the big man came Matt Leland, and trailing him was Will Ranson. Most of the time Garrett rode with his right hand in the pocket of his coat, keeping it warm as much as possible. His gun and holster were beneath the coat, sheltered from the snow.

They reached a road half hidden in the snow. On one side of this were trees and brush, on the other a stretch of open country. Garrett held up his right arm in a signal to those behind him to halt.

"The tree is over there," he called back. "Wait here, until I make shore I've found it."

The three men bunched their horses and sat in their saddles waiting as Garrett rode across the road toward the trees. He wondered if they had noticed the fresh tracks of horses' hoofs that even the falling snow had not yet blotted from the road.

He searched for an old dead tree and finally discovered one. Then he drew his

gun, let out a wild yell and fired three shots in the air.

"Whoopee!" he yelled, as he quickly reloaded the gun. "I've found it."

"It's a trick!" Carter shouted. "Those three shots were a signal for help. Get him!"

The three men came at Garrett with their guns roaring, but their fingers were cold and stiff and their aim was bad. A bullet plucked at his coat, another whistled by his ear, a third went over his horse's head.

He shot Carter in the right arm, and the big man dropped his gun. Leland was wildly trying to use two guns, but they slid out of his hands when Garrett's second shot got him in the shoulder.

"I give up!" shouted Ranson, tossing his gun to the snow of the road. "Don't shoot me. Don't shoot."

The roaring of the guns died away, and out of the storm appeared a group of horsemen. It was the deputy sheriff of Red Gulch and a posse. They quickly captured the three outlaws. The posse had been out searching for a missing lawman and had heard the signal for help.

"These men killed Sheriff Ware and buried the body behind an old abandoned line camp cabin," Garrett said. "Ranson here admitted it, and he was afraid to walk over the sheriff's grave."

"Garrett is one of us," said Carter quickly. "He's the lone bandit who robbed the Red Gulch bank."

"That's right," said Garrett. "But that holdup was a fake. It was all arranged so you real bank robbers would hear about it." He grinned. "Told you my uncle would feel bad if he thought I was an outlaw. When he disappeared I had to find out what had happened to him.

"You mean that lawman we killed was yore uncle?" demanded Carter.

"That's right," said Garrett. "You know, you told it straight—that shore was the cabin of no return for you three sidewinders!"

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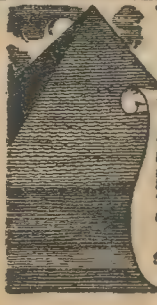

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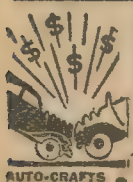

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TEZCA

(Concluded from page 64)

he whispered. "There is no place for you here where men will not leave you alone. Find us some hidden valley where we can live in peace."

This is the end of the story as they tell it around Camarillo. Which way Ramon, Juana and Tezca rode, no man knows for sure. A storm which came before morning, hid their trail. They were never seen again in the Camarillo country. What happened to them remains a mystery.

If, however, this leaves you dissatisfied and if you press for more information and a better ending, the one telling the story may admit that many years later a stranger from beyond the Quemados boasted of having seen a giant, black, Arabian stallion in a secluded, far-off valley. This stallion, he reported, was owned by a man named Ramon, a man who had quite a large family. The youngest child, Juana, loved nothing more than a ride on the stallion's back.

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AN EASTERN PHILOSOPHER once wrote, "I met a hundred men on my way to Delhi and all of them were my brothers." If all over the world we could all get this feeling into our hearts there would no longer be racial, religious, or national antagonisms. For each of us this is an individual problem. My first responsibility is to know that I look at my neighbors without regard to color or creed, and with the knowledge that we are part of a great world brotherhood. I do not think tolerance is enough. The word implies a patient indulgence of opinions and practices that differ from our own. We must try to reach a sympathetic understanding.

If one really knows a man or a race, prejudices vanish. Charles Lamb once put his finger on this truth. Somebody wanted to introduce him to a man he did not like. Lamb said he did not want to meet him because if he knew the man he would begin to like him.

—WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 8)

After a few lively sashays, I disconnected with that salmon by pointing the rod at it, snapping the leader and letting it keep the Golden Demon for a souvenir.

In past get-togethers I've made enthusiastic mention of steelhead that run with the salmon in the rivers of the Pacific Northwest.

The steelhead is a seagoing rainbow trout, but much larger and stronger than inland, stay-at-home trout. He is a cousin of the Atlantic salmon, both being species of the Salmo family. Salmo gairdnerii is the steelhead, S. salar, the Atlantic salmon.

What Is Conservation?

In the course of time, with the growing pressure of civilization, the steelhead will go the way of his Eastern relative, which used to enter New England rivers as far south as the Hudson. Except for a pathetic few survivors in a couple of Maine rivers, the only Atlantic salmon left are up in Canada.

In a few years, a series of great and wonderful power and flood control dams will go in along the Rogue, ending forever the run of salmon and steelhead in that world-celebrated stream. Sport and tourist interests opposed the project, but the U. S. Reclamation Service won out.

A strange fact about that bitter controversy is that both sides represented themselves as conservationists. The one thing that Westerners agree on is that conservation is the nation's leading domestic issue. But what is conservation? In my years of roaming the outlands, from Texas west, I've observed that conserving one natural resource is often bound to destroy another.

Some years back, the Reclamation Service got busy and drained many basin lakes and bottomlands that were the natural reservoirs for flood waters. In so doing, they wiped out the age-old nesting grounds of millions of waterfowl, thus exterminated more ducks and geese than generations of hunters.

Artificial Lakes

It's admitted now, even among the engineers responsible for the program, that the results, from an economic standpoint, were disappointing.

[*Turn page*]

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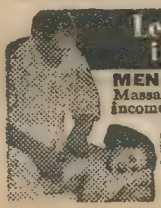

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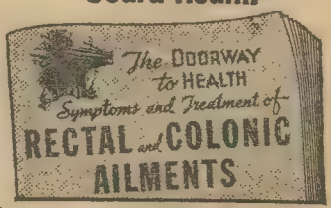

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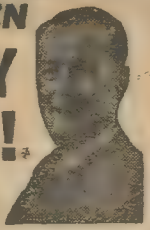

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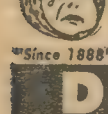

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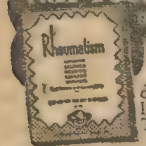

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So now government agencies have turned to creating artificial lakes instead of drying up natural ones. The benefit in flood control, power development and irrigation will be enormous. But some wildlife will suffer. The fish loss will be beyond calculation, because high dams obstruct fish spawning migrations.

Off-hand, you'd think that large bodies of water would encourage an increase in fish population. But there are biological factors that produce the opposite result in man-made lakes. The principal factor is that the fluctuating volume, caused by unnatural raising and lowering of the water level, destroys aquatic life on the shoreline, or marginal zone. On this chain of life, with its countless organisms, depends the food supply of most sport fishes.

The U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service is doing a marvelous job in maintaining the fish population, but efforts to stock and maintain trout in such dam-lakes as Shasta, on California's Sacramento, Fort Peck dam on the Missouri in Montana, and at many others have been failures.

Oregon's Willamette

Many a Northwest river, where salmon and steelhead are seldom or never seen nowadays, used to be visited by vast schools that old-timers say you could almost walk across, from bank to bank.

One such river is Oregon's Willamette, largest tributary of the lower Columbia. This extensive river system could raise many tons annually of sea-run fish important commercially as well as valuable to sportsmen. Could, I say. But a barrier more formidable than any dam, shutting them off from spawning waters, is the intense pollution caused by sewage disposal from Portland and other growing cities, and from chemical waste.

The nature and needs of sea-run fish is a complicated study. Most of the surging new population in the Pacific Northwest, which have the destiny of rivers in their hands, are utterly ignorant on the subject.

Scores of noble, public-spirited men have set their hearts and minds to solving conser-

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vation problems through the years, and much progress has been made. Where mistakes have been made, we've got to face the facts, if better days and better ways are to come.

The Bright Side

Here's the bright side of it. Progress has brought blessings that the pioneers never thought possible. When some old hairy mastodon like me starts to harp on "the good old days," he's forgotten their numerous disadvantages.

I'm humbly thankful, as I roam the outlands from Texas west, for the benefits of easy, comfortable travel. It used to be that anybody who got a hundred miles from home on a vacation bored his friends stiff by talking about it the rest of his life. Nowadays, I often make longer hops before breakfast.

Hops, did I say? Come to think, I reckon I am interested in hops, after all! Hopping around, that is, from one place to the next. So I'll have some more "hop" palaver for you in next month's TEXAS RANGERS Magazine. I'm hopping from hither to yon right now, and there's always something new and exciting around the next bend.

—CAPTAIN STARR.

NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

IF A PERSON could hang suspended high enough over the State of Texas, and at the same time have the penetrating, telescopic eyes of an eagle, he would probably see pinpointed across the state a series of tiny dots. These dots would be oil-well rigs. For oil has been discovered in nearly all parts of Texas, and has brought to the natives wealth in untold amounts.

Texas has been blessed with many natural resources, but nothing has brought in golden wealth like oil. Although millions of dollars have been garnered in cattle and sheep raising, and still are, the liquid gold has contributed fortunes to ranchers and dirt farmers in a manner still causing amazement to those who rode the range and tilled the soil year after year.

From the Gulf coastal country to the plains of West Texas, oil towns and rigs cover the landscape. The Panhandle, famed cattle region, has its share of steel rigs holding drills probing the bowels of the earth for liquid

[*Turn page*]

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gold. Eastern Texas and its farmland have contributed millions of dollars in fairly shallow oil pools. Even today, cattle can be seen grazing through the oil rigs pushing skyward. And many a rancher, sitting on his veranda, thanks his luck that oil on his grazing sections brought him revenue at times when the price of beef hardly covered his operating expenses.

But with the oil strikes came those who always follow the easy money—gamblers, high-pressure stock operators, gunmen and such. Overnight, boom towns appeared on the prairies where hitherto was nothing but sagebrush and rattlesnakes. Some of these towns were, and are, tougher than any trail towns of the past. At times, the situation wherein oil operators were trying to lease or buy ranchland in order to drill for oil, caused conflict between the ranchers on one side and the drillers on the other.

Ranchers were suspicious, and with just cause, of this penetration of their range. For oil fumes and spray, plus uncapped wells spouting gas, didn't improve the grass any. And with this unrest came the inevitable: gunplay. And with gunplay came the Texas Rangers.

In the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS, Jackson Cole, famed Western writer and authority on Texas in particular, takes Ranger Jim Hatfield to Tomawson, a boom oil town smack in the middle of cattle rangeland.

In the novel THE RIMROCK RAIDERS, Hatfield comes on a situation wherein the new—the oil men—come in conflict with the old, in this case the established cattle ranchers. And where big money was involved, Hatfield was certain bloodshed and death would follow. And he was more than right!

Captain Bill McDowell, salty old head of the Texas Rangers, sitting in his office in Austin, gave Hatfield the setup before he sent him out on the case. After explaining about the new oil strike and the town of Tomawson that had boomed up over night,

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Captain Bill told of an organized opposition growing against the oil people. Cowmen, he stated, said the oil was killing grass and spoiling water and that uncapped gas was killing cows. And that, strangely, beef was being widelooped by the mavericks who had come to Tomawson. He said further that the oil men blamed the cowmen for setting fire to a well that nearly burned some of them to death, to say nothing of the boom town.

As Jim Hatfield digested this information, McDowell went on to tell him that the deputy sheriff stationed there couldn't handle the situation and had asked aid from the Rangers.

Hatfield stood up then, his eyes holding an expression of pleased anticipation, for he knew Captain Bill expected him to take over the job of investigating the strange situation around Tomawson. He hitched up his double cartridge belts, straightened his broad-brimmed "J.B." With a laconic good-by to his superior, he made for his horse Goldy and took off for the oil boom.

As usual, Hatfield didn't thrust himself into the middle of the mystery without first

[*Turn page*]

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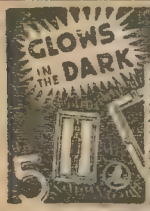

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looking around on his own and getting the "lay of the land," so to speak.

The main thing that interested him was the fact that old Tom Mawson, grizzled rancher who hated the oil men so much—and after whom the town of Tomawson was named, in a conciliatory gesture—was losing cattle to rustlers right under the noses of his own men and the oil men. This hardly made sense, what with the more important, and easier money to be made right there in the oil fields.

But easy money or not, it was this rustling that gave Ranger Hatfield the first clue to a deep-dyed plot that whirled around old Tom Mawson.

Why were owlhooters trying to wideloop the old man's beef with easier money to be found? Why were cattle found dead and wells poisoned? Who was the mastermind behind all this devilment?

For the answer to Jim Hatfield's problem, look forward to THE RIMROCK RAIDERS in the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS, wherein a black Golconda of liquid wealth brings death and destruction to the range as it spurts its golden treasure skyward! It's a great novel of Texas—and one of Jim Hatfield's most exciting adventures.

In the next issue, too, author Harold Preece gives us another fact article in his series on "Famous Texas Rangers"—AVENGER OF THE CHAPARRAL. Don Jesus Sandoval was a Mexican-Texas rancher with a great love for his wife and daughter. But when he came home from a business trip to find his ranch burned to the ground, his cattle stolen and his wife and daughter defiled by the raiders and now in a convent from the shame, he went berserk.

He swore that he would never rest until he had brought death to the bandit chief across the Border who called himself General Juan Flores. For Sandoval knew that it was Flores who had been behind the rapine and destruction of his *rancho*. . . . From then on, it was kill or be killed, until Sandoval had fifty notches on his derringer—each one representing an outlaw.

It was then that Sandoval, on invitation, joined the Texas Rangers under the great Captain McNelly, and helped him clear out the Rio Grande Valley of outlaws. Learn in the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS how Sandoval finally met up with General Flores, and how he obtained his revenge.

Also in the next issue will be the usual number of crackling Western stories and features. Be on hand for a feast of reading enjoyment.

OUR MAIL BAG

ONCE again comes that time of the month when we dump the old Mail Bag upside down, heap all you good readers' correspondence on ye editor's desk and bury our nose in your likes and dislikes of TEXAS RANGERS. Eyes may be a bit bleary at the day's end from all that reading, but believe us, folks, it's really lots of fun. We do our best to give you what we think the finest in the way of fiction and fact, but it's really a big help when an interested reader comes through with a suggestion that will improve the magazine. And every time there are differences of opinion, we try to determine what is the majority view and make it our guide in planning future issues.

Now for a few choice items from the Mail Bag:

The Jim Hatfield stories appeal to me tremendously. They are full of action, and fast moving. I can hardly wait for the next issue. The other stories are good, too. Inasmuch as I am always willing to give credit where credit is due, I'd like to mention Captain Starr's *Frontier Post*, which is an extremely interesting department and should be given as much praise as the stories and their authors. Captain Starr knows his onions and I am certain that your readers will agree with me. I have traveled a lot and I have seen all kinds of places, and when Captain Starr writes about them it brings back memories of the past.—*G. G. Krause, Houston, Texas.*

After having read *Texas Rangers* I find it definitely swell. But please, let Jim Hatfield remain the one-and-only Lone Wolf. Isn't this what the author intended? Rugged action and the lack of romance is what makes your magazine so outstanding and different from others. I realize the difficulty of pleasing so many readers, however.—*Marvin Starr, Beaumont, Texas.*

My husband and I have been readers of *Texas Rangers* for years and at one time had never missed a copy. But something is so wrong! Please, Jackson Cole, I don't mean to be rude, but you're slipping, and why? Your Jim and Goldy stories used to be tops. Please put them back together again where they belong—alone! It isn't right to Jim and Goldy to have Buck and

[*Turn page*]

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Anita, or anyone else but just the two of them.—*Mrs. Sallie Rice, Salem, Ill.*

I have been a *Texas Rangers* reader for over eight years, and never missed a copy. But tell Jackson Cole, Jim Hatfield doesn't need Buck Robertson or his sister Anita. He does a better job without them! If you think I am kidding, ask Captain McDowell.—*Thomas H. Pickering, Plymouth. Pa.*

I read every story of Jim Hatfield and I notice that some of my fellow-readers want Jim to have a girl in his stories. This, I think, is nonsense. He should be left as he is, at his very best. For instance, in "The Kiowa Killer," "The Black Gold Secret," "Guns of the Yellow Hills," and many more, what would have happened if he'd had a girl? The only answer is, six feet under the ground!—*Kenneth C. Oldwage, Cape Town, South Africa.*

Is Hatfield getting old, or something? Why does he need a partner, or girl? He has gone a long time without need of either. He needn't fall in love or have a partner. My Dad reads *Texas Rangers*, too, and I know he doesn't go in for romance, either. Keep Hatfield as he *was*—as a real Lone Wolf.—*M. J. Wassa, Bannister, Mich.*

I have been a reader of *Texas Rangers* for many years and I find *Texas Rangers* better than it has ever been. Buck and Anita Robinson are swell characters, keep them in as they have brightened up many of the stories. I enjoy every issue of *Texas Rangers.—James Donwald, Dallas, Texas.*

Good work! Keep it up! I like your recent novels very much, and I also like Buck and Anita. They should be in some of the stories, and at other times Jim Hatfield should work alone.—*Edward Frankline Briggs, Roswell, New Mexico.*

I have been reading *Texas Rangers* for a number of years and think it the best Western magazine on the market. I like the Hatfield stories just as they come. Jim Hatfield is a good example of what an honest officer should be. And in my opinion, Texas is a good background for a Western story.—*Mary L. Gehl, Dubuque, Iowa.*

Quite a few letters from Texas, this time. Maybe that's an indication of something. We hope it means they like a magazine with a background of their own state and a hero who belongs to one of the greatest law organizations in the world. Anyway, as we close we hope that you've enjoyed the magazine from cover to cover. And we still wish to hear from all you readers. Kindly address all letters and postcards to The Editor, TEXAS RANGERS, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, New York. Thanks, everybody, and *Adios!*

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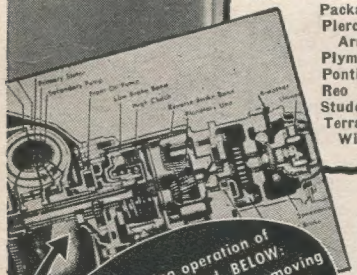

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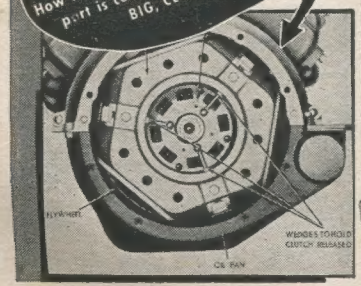

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